

# THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE

EXTRAORDINARY NEW FICTION ISSUE 17 £3

new stories

STEVE RASNIC TEM

CONRAD WILLIAMS

JEFF VANDERMEER

ROBERTA MURPHY

JOEL LANE

ALEXANDER GLASS

JASON FROWLEY

the interview

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

in heaven, everything is fine

DAVID LYNCH

a person from Indianapolis

KURT VONNEGUT

"impressive, slick, thoroughly professional"

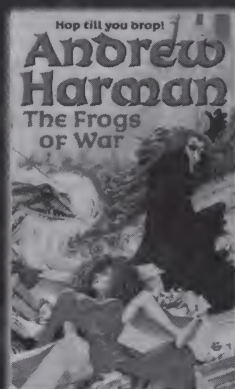
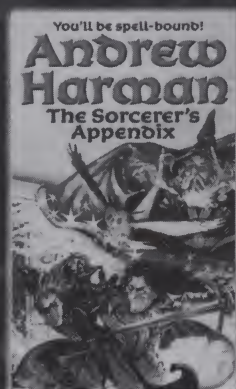
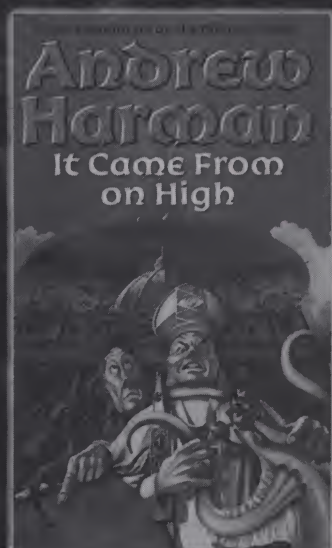
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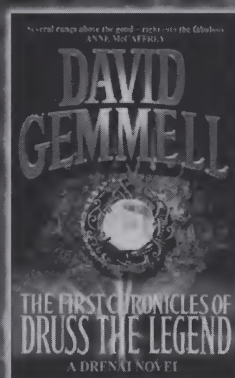
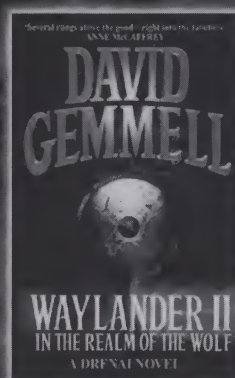
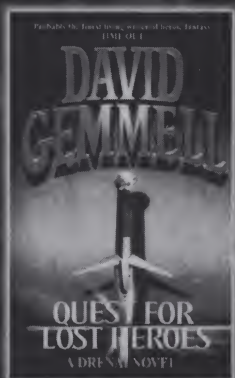
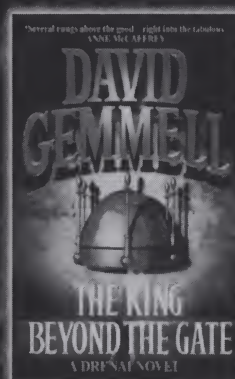
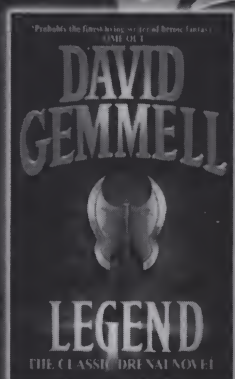
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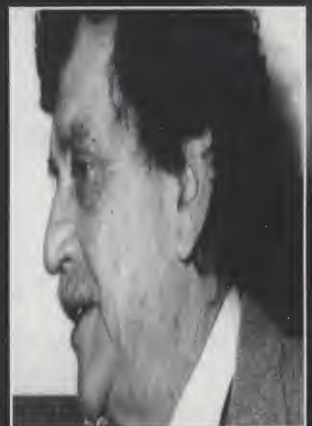
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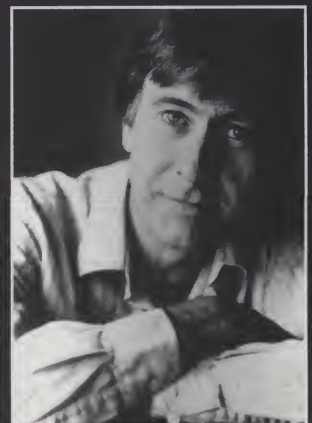
Front Cover: Gift by Wendy Down



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### Shadowlink

The latest news is that TTA Press now has a website! This is great news for all readers as it allows you to take part in TTA activities on a more interactive basis. For example, one of the fascinating features taking place right now on the website is a controversial debate about the setting up of a new worldwide society for literature of the fantastic (or speculative, or imaginative – what it could most accurately be called is one aspect of the discussion).

The website is called *Shadowlink* and it's designed to be user-friendly (none of those nasty, unwieldy frames), simple to navigate (there's nothing worse than not being able to find your way back to where you were without a lot of searching), and easy on the eye yet at the same time both seductive and alluring. It features stories, articles, artwork, competitions and details of recent and forthcoming issues of *The Third Alternative*, *Zene* and *Crimewave*. Not to mention pages of useful links to other sites, special offers, submissions information, the latest news, and much more.

And there will be many new features added in the weeks and months ahead. This is *not* one of those websites where you go back after three months only to discover that nothing has changed. A new main issue of *Shadowlink* appears monthly, while developments in areas such as the debate mentioned above are updated within that issue as they happen – frequently on a daily basis.

If you don't have Internet access you needn't be excluded. You can still take part in the Readers' Poll of Best Stories. All you have to do is to write down the titles and authors of what you judge to be the best six stories to appear in *The Third Alternative* issues 1–16. Include the

number of the issue in which each story appears and send your list to the TTA editorial address. Results will be announced in the December issues of *The Third Alternative* and *Shadowlink*. Or, of course, email your votes to *Shadowlink*. If you do that *and* write a short review of your favourite story (to be posted on the website) you'll receive a free book.

Now that we have a visitor counter on the site it's interesting to see some of the statistics it incidentally provides. Though the website has barely been advertised in the US, American visitors outweigh British visitors by two to one, together the two countries contributing the vast bulk of all visitors. We've also had visitors from Canada, Sweden, Australia, The Netherlands and Greece – in that order in terms of numbers. Unaccountably, Tuesdays are the most popular days for numbers of visitors every week – if you've any idea why that should be then please let me know (the least popular day, by the way, is Saturday). It's also interesting to note that the most popular time of day for visiting the website has proved to be between 8pm and 9pm, the most popular time of the night between 2am and 3am. But even at 4 and 5 in the morning there are visitors to the site, though country of origin is obviously an important factor here.

It's still early days, and we're very keen to hear from you about what new features you would like to see on *Shadowlink*, so please write in and let us know what you want! Send emails to [lawredy@aol.com](mailto:lawredy@aol.com), or write to the TTA Press editorial address.

*Shadowlink* can be visited at <http://members.aol.com/ttaldyer/index.html>. Add it to your list of favourite places!

Lawrence Dyer

### Crimewave

Modern crime fiction is a genre for writers with something to say, giving them the freedom to discuss ideas, to create characters and explore locations, and above all to investigate human psychology and modern society.

As modern crime writers are proving, the genre is as broad in scope as any other: humour, horror, satire, escapism and political analysis are all encompassed in crime fiction. The genre's traditions can be played straight, or turned on their heads. *Crimewave* aims to cover the entire territory of crime fiction, publishing the very best stories from across the spectrum, from the misnamed 'cozy' to the deceptively subtle hardboiled.

The short story has always been the laboratory and the engine room of crime fiction, with many highly successful crime novelists making time to work in the short form. Every issue of *Crimewave* will contain stories by authors who are household names in the crime fiction world, but we'll also constantly find room for lesser known and even unknown writers who have something new to say, or a new way of telling old truths. We also encourage writers to cross genres, with writers better known for their sf or horror, for instance, using their talents to tackle crime fiction.

The magazine itself is unique and sophisticated in appearance, with dazzling duotone covers. By the time TTA18 is published on December 1st, the first issue of *Crimewave* will be in the shops. Please help us get this new magazine off to a good start by placing an advance order or subscription. Details can be found on the opposite page. Meanwhile, many thanks to all those TTA readers who have already subscribed to *Crimewave*.



# special offers

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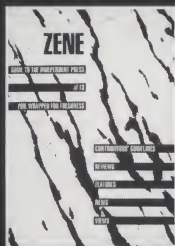
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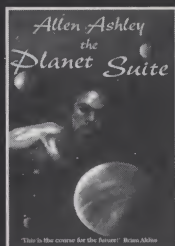
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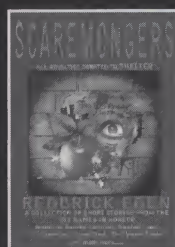


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### Submissions

Stories, artwork and features welcome.

Please study several issues of the

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enclose return postage (overseas

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Coupons or an email address). We are

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enclose a covering letter and send just

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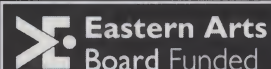
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CONRAD WILLIAMS  
**THE ASPECT**



**THE GAME HAD SERVED EMILY WELL THROUGH** some of the most traumatic episodes of her childhood. She had employed the trick when her discomfort or stress reached their most unmanageable levels. It helped to calm her, to refresh her focus and steer it away from harmful areas.

A primary school teacher — Miss Sharples — had introduced her to the game. On a Friday afternoon, autumn ripe outside the window, her class (dozy after slogging through exercises in a Beta book) had been rewarded with a period of rest.

“Close your eyes,” Miss Sharples had gentled. Soft sunlight poured through the high windows. “Now try to push out thoughts of anything. Turn your head into a cloudless sky, a still lake. Everyone relax.”

Emily had been thinking about Miss Sharples, her favourite teacher. She was young and pretty and she played guitar sometimes. Her hair was long and blonde. At the moment it was tied back into a pony tail. Errant strands fluxed in the light like corn silk. When the class was working, Miss Sharples would sometimes sketch one of her pupils. Emily had been thrilled to realise that she had been the model one day. They had talked many times when Miss Sharples was on playground duty and Emily had walked alongside her, holding her hand while the teacher drank mugs of tea and told Graham to leave Lucy alone.

“What would you like to be when you grow up?” she had asked one day.

“A mum,” Emily had said. “I want a baby.”

Miss Sharples had smiled. “What would you call your baby?”

“Bagpuss. Because he’s my favourite.”

“Oh Emily...that’s so sweet. You are a one.”

Miss Sharples had helped them all to relax. “Now, I want you to concentrate on all the sounds you can hear. If you really listen hard, you’ll be surprised by what you pick up. Concentrate...”

Emily had forced even this last, comforting thought from her mind and allowed herself to become as polished and empty as the blackboard when it was scrubbed down at the end of the day. Sound flooded into her. She heard big noises first: buses and cars on the road; an aeroplane; Mr Wace in the next classroom haranguing Brian Bedford for eating chewing gum. Then Emily had been aware of birds sporadically tweeting messages to each other, the gurgle of water in the radiator, the creak of the wooden chair as Miss Sharples shifted position; the persistent shuss of her pencil as it shed layer upon layer of graphite.

Emily had felt herself losing all sense of her own mass, the appreciation of her own physicality was soon limited to the thud of her heart and the focused heat behind her eyes. Her ears were straining so acutely for input that she imagined them expanding to the size of satellite dishes.

She had felt, that first time, close to hearing something ultra-special, something for which she was designed never to hear. But then Miss Sharples had broken through her trance and asked everyone to write down what they had heard. Emily’s grip on the sublime had been lost to the subsequent thrash of voices and coughs and laughter: the normal hubbub of the classroom. Yet it had shocked her, this infusion of noise that she knew so well, and she

found herself pining for a return to the immanent magic of the silence.

It was not to be. Over the years, her ambitions for the game were lost to a more prosaic need: a shield to withdraw behind as the tiffs at home between her parents evolved into violent rows. She didn’t have the time or privacy in which to seek out that secret level, that fragile introduction to a fantastic new threshold of experience. That meta-calm.

The arguments took her out of herself at all times of the day or night. Even when the flat was in the deepest recesses of dark, she’d find herself jolted awake by some remembered spat, some imagined accusation.

But now she had escaped the sniping and threats it was possible to sink into a fugue of her own design. It was better, but no less frustrating because it seemed any youthful capacity she had for reaching a rarefied plane of relaxation had deserted her.

Emily lived alone these days. Seventeen now, with a job in admin for a local waste disposal company. She owned a cat, rented a flat and everything in it, and was saving up to buy a car. Her mother was dead a year; her father was somewhere in Saudi, in thrall to a woman earning 90K a year as a consultant. That’s all she knew. Her need to disassociate herself came more from the pain of discovering that she could not reproduce: her ovaries were withered and dry as fruit that had failed on the tree. Trying to trick herself into believing that this was just, that it meant her own offspring would never be able to go through the tribulations she experienced comforted her for about a nanosecond. Talking had helped. The cleaner at the waste disposal firm — Nula — was about her age and they would chat if Emily was working late, Nula Hoovering around her feet or vibrating a feather duster into the cobwebbed corners of the office. Only, as their friendship flourished — to the extent where they now were spending every Friday night together prowling the bars of the town centre — Emily was hit by a double whammy. Nula had confessed that she was pregnant at the same time that Emily discovered that she would never have children. She had tried to appear cheerful, congratulatory, but how could she summon a smile from her mouth when it was filled with cold ashes?

Over the months, she saw less of Nula and her sadness deepened when she discovered from one of their regular couriers that the father of her child had gone down for attempted murder and Nula had founded a drug habit. She tried to convince herself that the resentment growing in her like some malformed ghost foetus was aimed at herself, at her barren condition.

Tonight, the skies above London seemed too empty, as thought they were inflating, sucking in great gulps of cold air to fill the streets. She opened a window and her breath instantly whitened. Glue was by her side a second later, nose twitching as he took in the secret smells of the city. Emily watched his eyes flicker as he scouted dark pockets beyond the window. She watched his ears twitch to the stimulus of a thousand sounds, unknowable to her.

On the television, a bare-chested man was digging a peaty hill, loading his spade, twisting to place the loam on a barrow. His muscles flexed and shifted like the comfortable slither of fish guts in a wet-waste skip. Like tectonic activity.



Her languor followed her into a hot bath, along with the sinuous labour of the man. She had not seen his face; only his back, his shoulders bulging, sweat dripping from black hair.

She thought of herself being manipulated under him, like the peat. His muscles would dip and shift as he delved into the soft parts of her, dug a trench through her desire.

She squeezed her legs together and allowed one hand to cover a breast, its proud nipple dimpling her palm.

She came without having to work for it, settling deeper into the bath as heat spread from her core. Sounds encroached this pocket of tranquillity that, in the usual scatter of noises would clash with and subsume each other. The gentle snick of a plate against another in the draining rack; the muffled frenzy of a televised football match; a spatter of rain against the window; a woman shouting: "Adam!"

Eyes closed, drifting in the heat and oil of the bath and the inner warp and weft of endomorphines from her orgasm. Drifting...

And now: a new sound. The merest hint of a frown creased her brow as she tried to identify it. It borrowed from sources that were of comfort to her — the soft fizz of gentle tides on flat beaches; fat bees in late summer — yet this was underpinned by a souging, soaring ululation, as of choirs heard at distance, elevated voices rolling around cool, marble walls.

For a while, time stopped and she and the sound became indivisible. When she became aware of her surroundings again, her skin was pruned and the bathwater uncomfortably chill. She slaked a devilish thirst from the tap in the kitchen and slumped, exhausted, into an armchair, the sound a slow, exquisite loop.

The rest of the evening was not pleasurable for Emily, although she couldn't work out why. Her distress was without form, it shredded at her and made her so fractious that she found herself crying during a scene in a film that didn't warrant such a reaction. The sound fluted around her thoughts with the persistence of a catechism. Its mystery followed her to bed where she unsuccessfully fought it with a novel and a small shot of cheap whisky. Unable to sleep, she stalked the flat in the dark, Glue sticking to her — a lambent S of pale fur winding between her legs.

Finally, just before dawn, the sound withdrew, but without ceremony; for some time she failed to notice its absence. She had become so used to it that it had started to insinuate itself into her common stream of perceptions. When she noticed it was gone, instead of feeling relieved — as a tinnitus sufferer given some form of reprieve — she felt cheated. Emily found herself yearning for its special timbre and couldn't even recreate it in her imagination. It was like trying to describe an orgasm. It was like trying to understand God.

Hollow, though from lack of sleep or being divested of the sound she couldn't discern, Emily fed Glue, collected her things and walked to the bus stop. Last night's frost had endured the sunrise; her breath formed before her in the queue, mingling with her companions' exhalations to rise like the imperceptible creep of ice.

Only when she was ensconced in her seat and beginning to benefit from the heaters beneath her did she start to notice the subtle changes in the appearance of her fellow

passengers. They were people who she knew well yet had never spoken to. The same crew at the same bus stop at the same time every morning: huddled and cursing during the winter, bowed and cursing in the summer. On one occasion, heavily hungover, she had crossed the road to ask a stranger the time when her bus was late and she was suffering from disorientation. It was as though these familiars were too familiar, that it was too late to break the unspoken taboo of communication.

But now, as she noticed the small patches of burnt skin, the minor amputations, the unhealed wounds, the compulsion to breach this last barrier was great indeed. Somehow she bit down on her panic and simply took in the extent of their ravagement, trying hard to reconcile their usual bland, dislocated expressions with the painful-looking lesions and blisters dotting their flesh.

This woman sitting diametrically opposite her had suffered a nasty burn. The hem of her coat was scorched; her tights had melted into the flesh of her thigh. The injury was superficial but it looked painful; if it wasn't treated soon, infection was likely to set in. The man in the seat behind her was trying to turn the pages of his newspaper but without thumbs his progress was fatally impeded. The nubs of his knuckles were raw and seeping. A baby's eyes bled. A girl carrying a helium balloon moved her head Emily's way, showing the tendons as they writhed through the hole in her throat.

Emily spent the rest of the day on autopilot, taking dictation, filing invoices, receiving dockets from drivers returning from jobs they had completed. One of them, Towne, she was quite fond of. Today he received his cards for not covering his lorry with the correct netting. Waste had spilled all along Slutcher's Lane. Even in the cold the smell had been vile enough to inspire twenty complaints from local residents in the hour before lunch. She watched Towne disgustingly throw his keys into the jar where they were kept and dump his overalls in the washing bin. He gave her a broken look which she tried to repair with a smile but her abilities in that department were sorely wanting.

He slid behind the wheel of his car, dropping his wallet as he did so.

"Paul?" she shouted. "Wait!"

By the time she had made it across the car park, he had gone, a pall of exhaust smoke rising reluctantly into the still, cold air. She went to retrieve the wallet for him, but realised as she was bending to pick it up that it wasn't a wallet at all.

#### HOW SHE GOT THROUGH THAT DAY SHE WOULD

never know. As light failed and the temperatures dropped further, she wondered if she were losing her mind, or whether she had already lost it to that persistent, unvarying surge of sound. Although it had faded many hours ago, its unique patterns shuttled across her mind so that it seemed the sound had not dispersed at all and was merely tooling around in some deeper level of her consciousness before returning later.

All at once she became afraid of the new, skewed aspect that her life had adopted. It was not so much the unpleasantness of the visions — although stooping to collect Towne's boot (and finding his foot still in it) had been particularly



unsavoury — as pondering on the possible evolution of her plight. Where could it all end? What did it mean? The thought that it must mean something, that there was a signal there somewhere, a code to crack, spurred her on. If not, then what use was there in living? Madness surely could not fall so casually, so finally.

She wondered if talking to someone about her crisis might throw up some solutions or even provide her with an ally who understood and had experienced what she was going through. No sooner was the thought exposed than she seized upon it and dragged it out with her into the night.

#### **“NULA! NULA, WAKE UP!”**

Her fists on the rickety door rap a tattoo that sends concussions all around the estate. A ripple of white coalesces in the centre of the bubblewrap window, spreading as Nula approaches. When she opens the door, a smell charges Emily. She steps back, unwilling to try to identify the many odours that combine to make it.

“C’min,” Nula says, turning her back on her friend. Deep into the final trimester of her pregnancy, her stomach juts heavily. Emily hasn’t seen her for seven months.

A long streak of shit crept down the back of Nula’s towelling robe. A shivering dog watches Emily from the stairs. They enter the living room. A blackened scoop of tin foil rests on the arm of the settee, a glass tube poking from it like a sci-fi cigarette. The air in here is scorched and thick. Breathing tires Emily; she sits on a stool. On the TV, a man is enduring a close-up, the camera trying to catch his tears as he himself tries to catch them with a pinched finger and thumb, fumbling under the frames of his spectacles.

“Got no tea coffee. Soz.” Nula collapses into the settee, shifting her robe so she can scratch at her fusewire thatch of pubes. The sound crackles through the flat; the dog comes running as if invoked. It sits nervously at Nula’s side, prick twisting from and sinking back into its sheath like a lipstick.

Emily grinds down her nausea until she feels able to speak. “How far are you gone?” she asks, regretting the ambiguity of her question. Nula doesn’t notice.

“Should of come two week ago,” she says, reaching for the Lambert & Butler.

“Fuckin thing. Never get fuckin preggers, Em. I mean it...” The cigarette lollops between her lips like a conductor’s baton as she speaks. “Oh, shit, soz. I forgot.”

“It’s okay,” soothes Emily, hating her friend for her inconsideration — not just to her, but the baby she is carrying. “I need to talk to you.”



**BY DEGREES SHE WATCHED NULA FALL ASLEEP, THROUGH THE** desperate monologue she was offering. It was like the episodes of Bagpuss she had watched as a child. As that cat had drifted off to sleep, so all his companions followed suit: Gabriel the toad, Madeleine the rag doll, the mice on the mouse-organ. Professor Yaffle. She had loved Bagpuss, found it comforting. It harked back to an age of naiveté that was far removed from the modern preoccupations of time and effort. She wished she could have found a niche for herself in a more undemanding period.

Now, the flat sank into itself, as Nula gave herself to senselessness. The room accreted darkness in layers, like soil piled on a grave. Still Emily talked and in the rhythms of her own diatribe, the ebb and flow of Nula’s breath, Emily discovered a level of comfort that appeared to colour her surroundings. She was asleep before she had finished her latest sentence.



When she wakened, the flat was cold and crepuscular, the acrid ghosts of Nula's dragon-chasing hanging like curtains from the discoloured ceiling. Nula was a pale hill on the settee, her robe ridden up over her belly. Her legs were open, her sopping cunt dilated like a huge eye riven with infection.

Emily lurched for the phone, her muscles sluggish and unresponsive. With the receiver in her hand — "Nula! Nula wake up!" — she froze as a wet, tearing sound slowly unzipped the silence. Nula seemed to deflate as a mucoid, bloody sac oozed from between her legs. The light managed to pierce the membrane here and there, snagging on the thrash of limbs as Nula's offspring scrabbled to be free.

"Nula," she managed again, barely more than a sigh of cold air.

The thrashing stilled as Emily guessed what must be its head shift in her direction. It had heard her.

A claw raked the membrane open.

Dropping the phone, Emily fled the flat, the visceral fear of pursuit fuelled by the knowledge there was nobody for her to turn to.

Somehow she got home. At one point she hailed a taxi though she could barely afford it, turning away at the last moment when the driver had turned on his cab light to reveal a head that looked as though it had been chewed and spat out.

Above the grimy strata of night, she sensed terrible things flocking, eyeing her up, knowing she were dead and giving her free rein in this endgame, this madness at the end of her life, until reality kicked in and did for her and she could be claimed.

Was that it then? "Am I dead?" she blurted, breathless on the corner of her street. Reluctant light from a full moon troubled by cloud picked out a route to her door. Exhausted, she rang Nula but remembered, as the engaged tone sounded, that she had dropped the phone. She notified the hospital, hoping that what she had seen was an illusion brought on by her passive inhalation of Nula's heroin. She felt guilty at how she had left her friend. She spent a long time standing still in the centre of the room, waiting for her head to clear, to offer her an avenue of escape. Emily realised then that there was someone she could turn to after

all. The idea forming, she stuffed a holdall with clothes, showered, dressed and settled down on the sofa. It would be a good few hours yet before the bus station opened. Despite the fury of her uncertainties, she sank into sleep readily enough. No, not dead after all...just playing at it.



**A VIEW THROUGH A MUD-STREAKED WINDOW: THE SLUSHY DAWN** coating village roofs and misted farmland; broken slat-faced hills and flat, razed plains dotted with tree stumps and scorched earth. Emily drank it all in, her head resting against the frigid glass, the heat from her mouth whitening the fluid rush of scenery as it scrolled past the coach. Her companions numbered just five, excluding the driver, all thankfully huddled beneath piles of dark clothing: sleeping, brooding. She thought of her colleagues at the waste disposal firm wondering why she wasn't at work. Yeah, sure. They probably wouldn't even notice her absence.

Would it still be there? she wondered, as the coach breasted the rise above her home town. More importantly, would she still be there?

The coach halted in an ecstasy of hisses and jolts at the bus station. From there she walked narrow lanes flanked by hardy stone cottages. The branches of bare



cherry trees and rowans were cracks in the sky. Every step infused her with a warmth and security she believed had escaped her for ever. She never believed coming home could mean anything other than a return to violent anticipation.

The school had not changed. Its facade was still the imposing grey Edwardian structure of pillars, large windows and double doors. Once inside, her heels on the cold stone floor stabbed sharp echoes into the heights.

A woman she didn't recognise peered from the staff room, her eyes asking a question that her mouth couldn't form. She was chewing on a rock cake, the hand that wasn't holding it cupped beneath the hand that was, to catch any stray crumbs. The muffled sound of children reciting the 8x table became an ache that moved slowly through Emily's chest. She suddenly felt close to tears.

"My name's Emily," she began. "Emily Cheetham." And then she was crying and the old woman took her arm and drew her into the warm, smoky recesses of the staff room. She was given tea and tissues and 'there, there'. It transpired that the woman, Miss Massey, was the headmistress.

"Can you tell me," Emily said, once she had control of her emotions, "does Miss Sharples still teach here?"

"Miss Sharples?" she replied. She was scratching the inside of her forearm, the skin was reddening. "You mean Mrs Blondell. She married some years ago. No, she doesn't work here any more. She left, oh, just around the time I joined which was September 1985."

"Do you have an address for her?"

The headmistress smiled sweetly. "I'm sorry, but I can't disclose that kind of information." She placed her half-eaten cake in a Tupperware tub.

Emily felt crushed. "I've come such a long way. I'm in so much trouble."

Miss Massey squeezed her hand. "How about if I give her a call? Tell her that you're here and that you'd like to say hello? If she's happy with that then I'm sure it would be okay."

"Would you?"

Emily waited in the staff room while the headmistress returned to her office. She heard a bell go; this room would soon be filled with complaining teachers. A boy in a ruffled school uniform, the knot of his tie ridiculously large, poked his shaggy head round the door. He tutted, said "Aw, twat," then retreated.

Emily stood up; her attention was drawn to a smear of red on the Tupperware tub. She leaned towards it as Miss Massey's shoes spanked across the stone. "Oh Em-ily," she sang.

What was that in there next to the half-eaten rock cake? It glistened, congealing like something from the bin of a Chinese restaurant. Was it a throat?

"Good news my dear," said Mrs Massey, her nails rasping on her arm again. She was standing in the doorway. "Are you okay...you look a little peaky. Anyway, Mrs Blondell remembers you — imagine that! She's more than happy to see you. Here, let me scribble down her address."

Emily recognised the area. It was a well-to-do corner of the town, well away from the crumbling high-rises where she had been raised. Laughter from the playground; shoes shuffling across the stone. A dark hubbub of deep voices. Emily needed to get out.

She stammered her thanks, unable to keep her eyes from the long rent in Mrs Massey's forearm. Still she scratched, her fingernails snagging on a vein and pulling it free from the flesh like an elastic band. Emily forced herself through the scrum of tweed jackets and Brylcreem and ran through the playground, trying to avoid the curious glares of children that appeared too small and starved to be able to run so maniacally. She couldn't look back; not when she was convinced she had glimpsed some of the older children preparing nooses on the branches of trees for a queue of hooded pupils...

### EMILY WAS FEVERISH BY THE TIME SHE HAD

reached Mrs Blondell's lane. The sound had returned, like a warning siren that is regularly tested. She was worried it might be some kind of invocation, that at any moment, the streets would be filled with broken people bearing down on her to provide her with her own physical imperfections. She shuddered and hurried through Mrs Blondell's gate. Azaleas, read a sign by the door. A cat washing itself in the middle of an immaculately kept lawn eyed her for a second before returning to its task.

There was no answer when she knocked. Through the window, the living room had a special darkness about it, an un-lived-in look. Emily's grief was almost palpable.

She followed a path round to the side of the house and slipped through another gate that took her parallel to the back garden. A wheelbarrow stood in a plot of earth; uniform lengths of cane tied with green wire leaned against a pretty little garden shed with pink curtains in the window.

The back door was locked too. But Emily had to stop the noise. She couldn't stand it. Getting inside was of the utmost importance. She cast around for a rock and spotted a garden gnome. She hefted it and brought it down against the corner of the door window nearest the handle. Soon she was in the kitchen, listening to the house as it creaked and sighed around her. The kitchen was one of those rooms where happiness seemed to have been sunk into the walls. It smelled of pastries and mashed potato. There was a barometer which said FINE. There were colourful paintings by children stuck to the fridge with magnets. A note in pencil read: 'Tom, in case you get back before me there's a casserole in the fridge. I love you, and your lovely dumpling bum! Jo.'

Jo Sharples. Miss Sharples. Reading to the class as sunlight fed the gaps in the blinds. Chalk dust hanging in the golden shafts like dreams. Her guitar on Monday mornings: When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there... Watching her when I should have been concentrating on sums. Did you see me looking at you, when you were sketching Fiona Judd or Brendan Keane? I kept all the gold stars you stuck to my work. I still have the Biro you lent to me when I couldn't find my own.

*Bagpuss, dear Bagpuss*

*Old fat furry cat-puss*

*Wake up and look at this thing that I bring*

*Wake up, be bright*

*Be golden and light*

*Bagpuss, oh hear what I sing*

I copied the way you had your hair, grew it especially so I could wear it in a pony tail. I cry myself to sleep sometimes



because I'm not blonde, like you. I'm not Blondell, like you. And this infernal sound! It won't go away. Do you hear it? Do you hear it too? It's all your fault. If you hadn't...

Emily sank into the corner of the kitchen, her outstretched arms bringing down a wooden block filled with knives. They scattered on the floor, sliver mirrors reflecting her face in her hands. She reached out and grasped the handle of one of them and that was good, to get a grip, that was good. What had Miss Sharples done to her? Cast a spell, used special teacher magic to pull her inside out, to introduce her to the world as it really was. To take the scales from her eyes and show her the damage that people had suffered. Everyone was wounded. And now she could see.

Maybe there was really only one way to get rid of that fluting, impossibly beautiful, unbearably vile sound in her head...

"Bagpuss gave a big yawn, and settled down to sleep. And of course when Bagpuss goes to sleep, all his friends go to sleep too. The mice were ornaments on the mouse-organ. Gabriel and Madeleine were just dolls. And Professor Yaffle was a carved wooden bookend in the shape of a woodpecker."

Emily sat in the corner and waited.

**"I'M DREADFULLY SORRY TO CALL YOU OUT LIKE this, Mrs Blondell. It's awfully good of you to come."**

"No problem. I knew Emily at school. I taught her for a year."

"That's what we thought. She keeps saying your name over and over, has done for the past few weeks now. We're terribly worried about her. The doctors have tried all sorts of medication but they're stumped now."

The two women walked swiftly across the lawn towards the French doors of the ward where another nurse was waiting for them, arms folded.

The older of the two — Mrs Blondell — smoothed her coat nervously. Her hair was tied back, giving her a youthful

appearance. Her cheekbones were high, her eyes clear and wide-set. She had a fresh, open face, the kind that seems young all through life. "Tell me," she said. "What has she been saying?"

"It differs," said the nurse, glancing at her guest, perhaps to gauge how the woman would take what she was about to divulge. "Sometimes it's just your name, over and over. Sometimes she punctuates this litany with dreadful swear words and accusations. 'You effing did this to me, Sharples', she might say. Or 'Stop this effing noise, Sharples, you c-word'. It's very sad. She's such a bright young woman."

Mrs Blondell had grown ashen. "I see," she said. "I had no idea of her resentment towards me. I don't remember her as a problem child."

They had reached the French doors. The other nurse greeted Mrs Blondell with a grim smile and gestured for her to step inside.

"She's in here, is she?" Mrs Blondell asked, wrinkling her nose against the sour hospital odours.

"No, through that door there. Solitary. We'll be outside. She's perfectly safe. But call us if you need us."

**A KEY IN THE DOOR. "TOM! TOM! ARE YOU BACK yet?"**

Emily's knuckles whitened.

"Even Bagpuss himself once he was asleep was just an old, saggy cloth cat. Baggy, and a bit loose at the seams..."

"Tom?"

**"HELLO? EMILY?"**

"But Emily loved him."

**CONRAD WILLIAMS** was born in Warrington in 1969. He sold his first short story at the age of 18; subsequent work has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines with stories forthcoming in *Dark Terrors 4*, *The Ex-Files*, *Neon Lit: The Time Out Book of New Fiction*. His first novel *Head Injuries* was published in April to wide acclaim.

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In an Amsterdam cafe early in 1980: strategically mounted on the pastel walls are half a dozen television screens; a mixed clientele are seated around the split-level floor, drinking tea or coffee and watching an old government sponsored anti-dope propaganda film called *Reefer Madness*. At least half the viewers are stoned. Wooden ramps connect the different levels, and the waiters, dressed only in silk sorts and vests, rollerskate between tables, carrying orders to and fro.

1986. A man and a woman book into a seedy North London hotel for a night of keenly anticipated sex and passion. Somehow they find themselves part of a riotous wedding celebration, which is punctuated by wild dancing and drunken renditions of Irish Rebel songs. In the wee small hours, scheduled for sex, someone sings mournful ballads about lost loves and dead mothers. The man and woman have no regrets.

What have either of these events to do with David Lynch? Bear with me. Think about a young man visiting his girlfriend's parents for the first time. At the dinner table her father asks him if he'll do the honours and carve their 'man-made chicken'. The man politely obliges, only to find that when he pierces the small bird with the fork, slime oozes from its innards and its talonless legs begin to twitch. His girlfriend's mother has a fit. Father turns to him and says, 'Well Henry, whaddya know?' as if nothing untoward has happened. Henry's reply is, 'I don't know much of anything.'

Roses bloom above a white picket fence; a fire engine rolls by, with a fireman on the running board, waving to us, a dog at his feet. A middle-aged man waters his lawn on a sunny afternoon. He collapses from a heart attack. Laying on his back on the lawn, he clutches the hose to his chest, fountaining water into the air. A small terrier arrives and jumps on his chest, playfully sticking its head in the jet of water, oblivious to his suffering. A toddler wanders into view, attracted by the dog's yapping, wanting to join in the fun.

In a seedy roadhouse a man uses a hand-lamp as a microphone and lip-synchs campily to Roy Orbison's 'In Dreams' to an audience of hoods, whores and three or four matronly, middle-aged women.

A mother tries to seduce her daughter's boyfriend in a hotel toilet in order to separate the two. Her advances spurned, she becomes, in effect, the Wicked Witch of the East.

A man has a conversation with a weird looking guy at a party. The weird guy appears to know him and claims to have been in his house. The first man denies this, only for Mr Weird to tell him that not only has he been in his house but that he is there right now, at the same time he is there at the party, talking to the man. To prove his point he hands the man a cellular phone and has him call his house where Mr Weird answers him.

# SLIPSTREAM CINEMA

3

## DAVID LYNCH: IN HEAVEN, EVERYTHING IS FINE



by

MIKE O'DRISCOLL

These are 'Lynchian' events, the first two in reality, the others on film. What makes the scenes in the Amsterdam cafe and the North London hotel even more Lynchian, is that, immediately after *Reefer Madness*, the cafe programmers screened *Eraserhead*, and immediately prior to that thwarted sexual encounter at the hotel, I had seen *Blue Velvet* for the first time. David Forster Wallace has defined 'Lynchian' as referring to 'a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter' (*Premiere*, September 1996). The implication is that normality is a facade behind which lurks strangeness. Sometimes, in reality, we're allowed a glimpse behind the screen. In the films of David Lynch, we are, more often than not, confronted with a big time weirdness that causes us to question the nature of reality itself.

Described by Lynch as 'a dream of dark and troubling things', *Eraserhead* is the most explicit cinematic vision of the Surrealist manifesto since Buñuel and Dalí took an Andalusian dog for a walk. It's a bleak, disturbing and sometimes insanely funny take on sexuality and parenthood. Jack Nance plays Henry Spencer, a print worker in some vaguely post-apocalyptic American city, a grotesque Chaplin devoid of sentimentality but complete with a full set of pens in his breast pocket. Early on you realise that a coherent narrative is not what's on offer. We see Henry in his shabby apartment – bowls of water in the chest of drawers, a mound of earth with a spindly tree atop his bedside table, a window that looks out on a brick wall – and later, at the home of his girlfriend Mary, we have that first meeting with her parents. In what is both the film's funniest scene and, perhaps, one of the most excruciatingly embarrassing ever committed to film, Henry undergoes a series of ritual humiliations. First he pretends not to notice a bitch nursing her pups on the living room floor; then Mary has a fit, which he tries to ignore while explaining his job to her mother. Mary's father, a plumber, appears and complains that people seem to think pipes grow in their homes. Later, there is the dinner of 'man-made chicken'. Mary's grandmother, catatonic, or more likely dead, sits in the kitchen and has her arms manipulated by mother to toss a salad, perhaps to make her feel more involved. Mother asks if Henry has had sexual intercourse with Mary and threatens him with 'bad trouble' if he won't cooperate.

There is a baby, of course, and it is this baby that is at the heart of *Eraserhead*. Looking like a close relation of the creature that exploded from John Hurt's stomach in *Alien*, the baby embodies Henry's fear of responsibility and his sexual guilt. In a series of stunning dream sequences, Lynch makes this explicit and also seems to offer Henry

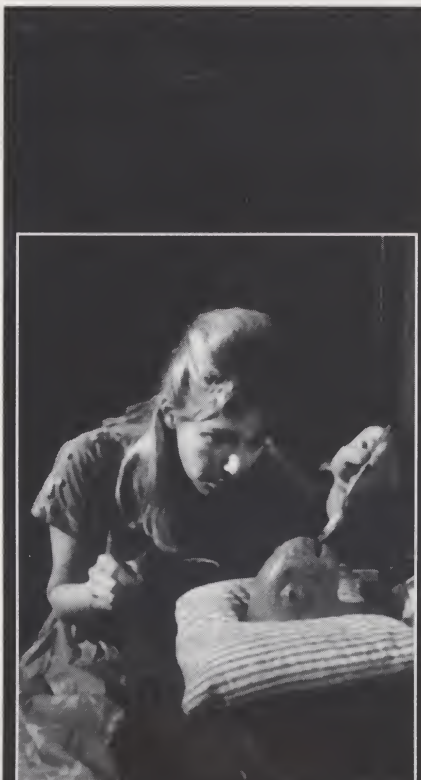


a way out. His mutant sperm are everywhere – in one nightmarish scene he extracts them from Mary, as if to undo the birth of the child, while she struggles, tangled up in the bedsheets. In another dream, a Doris Day clone with chipmunk cheeks crushes the sperm beneath her feet and sings: 'In Heaven/ everything is fine/ You've got your good things/ And I've got mine'.

Finally, Mary leaves and Henry has to care for the sick child alone. We feel sorry for Henry, and admire him when he nurses it (him/her?) back to health. But soon, our allegiance switches to the baby as Henry grows increasingly intolerant towards it. His killing of the child is a shocking and brutal moment, and the film's final image, showing Henry embracing the chipmunk woman (presumably in Heaven?) seems to confirm his desire for a sexual relationship devoid of commitment or responsibility.

Describing Lynch as a 'Jimmy Stewart from Mars', Mel Brooks gave him his first mainstream directorial assignment, *The Elephant Man*. Based on the true story of the hideously deformed John Merrick, who was rescued from life as a circus freak by the Victorian surgeon Frederick Treves, the film avoids the usual Hollywood clichés about human dignity triumphing over adversity by raising questions about Treves's motivation. Has he rescued Merrick from his appalling life for humanitarian reasons, or to further his own reputation as a man of science? Lynch coaxed brilliant performances from John Hurt as Merrick and Anthony Hopkins as Treves, and Freddie Francis's beautiful black and white photography creates a vivid picture of Victorian London, while at the same time evoking the expressionistic style of *Eraserhead*. The subject matter too, dealing with freaks and outcasts, echoes some of the themes of the earlier film. Perhaps these unsettling Lynchian overtones account for the film's failure to win a single Oscar, despite eight nominations, including one for best director. An omen, perhaps, of the way Lynch's relationship with Hollywood would pan out.

Lynch was born in the town of Missoula, Montana in 1946 and trained originally as an artist in Boston and Philadelphia. He had made a five minute short, *The Alphabet* – in which a creature gives birth to the letters of the alphabet – by the time he was eighteen, followed by another short, *The Grandmother* – in which a child plants seeds which sprout into a grandmother – in 1970. *Eraserhead* (1976) was his first full length feature, and following the success of *The Elephant Man*, Lynch was offered the director's job on *Return of the Jedi*. While it's interesting to speculate what Lynch would have done with Luke Skywalker, Hans Solo et al – give Chewbacca a junk habit, have Luke develop a sordid obsession with Princess Leia's hidden past as a transsexual drag queen – for various reasons, he turned down the job. His adaptation of Frank



CHARLOTTE STEWART IN ERASERHEAD



FREDDIE JONES, JOHN HURT IN THE ELEPHANT MAN

Herbert's epic novel *Dune*, which he both wrote and directed, perhaps gives us some indication of how a George Lucas/David Lynch collaboration might have turned out.

As it is, *Dune* is a major disappointment. Apart from two, or possibly three performances, the actors – particularly Kyle MacLachlan as Paul Atreides and Sting as Feyd Rautha – are miscast or simply wooden. Lynch later admitted that he shouldn't have done the film, but that he was tempted by the possibilities it offered to do the things he loved. The script is uneven and episodic, and only the performances of Brad Dourif as the slimy Piter De Vries, Paul Smith as the Beast Rabban, and especially Kenneth MacMillan's wonderfully over the top portrayal of the Baron Harkonnen, seem to hit the right note. Despite some perverse Lynchian touches, mostly to do with the Clan Harkonnen – the heartplugs the baron has implanted into his (male) sexual slaves, the hints at a homo-erotic relationship between the Baron and Feyd Rautha, and the gross acne that has erupted over Harkonnen's face, which seems to be an external manifestation of his inner evil – *Dune* doesn't really work as a Lynch movie should. It seems though, that Lynch came out of the project a shrewder man. 'I learned a lot of stuff on *Dune*,' he said afterwards. 'I started selling out on *Dune*.'

If Lynch had started selling out, there was no sign of such a manoeuvre in *Blue Velvet*, his dark exploration of the corrupt underbelly of small town America. Having had to suffer studio interference on *Dune*, Lynch accepted Dino De Laurentis's offer to direct *Blue Velvet* for a minuscule budget and a pittance for his directorial duties, in return for total control over the film. It's a safe bet to assume that De Laurentis didn't get the film he was expecting. What he did get was Lynch's most personal, and accomplished film to date.

*Blue Velvet* begins with a recreation of a small town American idyll – the aforementioned white picket fence and fire engine – shattered by the Lynchian fusion of the mundane and the bizarre – a dog using a dying man as a plaything. The film tells the story of Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan, much better here than in *Dune*) – the son of the heart attack victim, who has survived – getting caught up in a possible murder investigation. He finds a human ear in a field near his house and takes it to the local police station. Although warned off getting involved in the case, Jeffrey's curiosity is sparked by information he receives from the detective's daughter, Sandy (Laura Dern). Like a latter day Hardy Boy and Nancy Drew, Jeffrey and Sandy continue to investigate the case, almost as if it were some innocuous puzzle: 'What happens next?' she asks, early on. 'Are you game for more?' Jeffrey replies.

Lynch delights in placing Jeffrey in situations which force him to acknowledge his



own darker desires. Whilst hiding in a closet in the apartment of Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini), a nightclub singer connected with the case, Jeffrey is unable to suppress his own voyeuristic impulses and witnesses her being forced to have brutal sex with Frank (Dennis Hopper), the film's chief incarnation of evil. Later, he has sex with Dorothy and finds himself re-enacting Frank's brutality towards her. While Dorothy seems at first a willing victim, she later tells Jeffrey and Sandy that 'He [Frank] put his disease inside me'. While we can accept that she has been forced to into this sadomasochistic relationship through Frank's holding her husband and son hostage, we are left wondering how Jeffrey can justify his own sexual violence. The truth that Lynch seems to be implying is that we all have the potential to be monsters like Frank, a point made explicit when the latter tells Jeffrey, 'You're like me'.

*Blue Velvet* personifies weirdness – from Frank's constant need for pure oxygen, to Dean Stockwell's camp serenading of Frank. Sandy has a dream in which robins represent the light of love, explaining to Jeffrey that 'it means that there is trouble until the robins come', implying the triumph of good over evil, love over hate. But Lynch subverts this simplistic notion by having a robin appear at the end of the film, with a bug in its mouth. Jeffrey's aunt turns away in disgust, commenting 'I could never eat a bug'. Maybe so, but what Lynch seems to be implying is that love and disgust, beauty and ugliness, are all facets of the same concept. Sick? Perhaps, but *Blue Velvet* earned Lynch his second Oscar nomination for Best Director (almost inevitably, he didn't win), and it remains his most powerful, provocative film.

When I first saw *Wild at Heart* I thought it a dazzling road movie, with a great soundtrack, two fine performances from Nicholas Cage and Laura Dern, and some wonderfully strange cameos from an impressive supporting cast including Harry Dean Stanton, Diane Ladd, Isabella Rossellini, Willem Dafoe and Crispin Glover. Despite this, and the award of the Palme d'Or at Cannes, subsequent viewings have tempered my initial enthusiasm. On the whole, *Wild at Heart* never really hangs together; it is disjointed and incoherent in a way which suggests a failure of nerve rather than the surreal. Where *Blue Velvet* had something serious to say amid all the black comedy and strangeness, here, Lynch seemed to be treading water. Which is a crying shame because the road movie genre seems a particularly appropriate one for Lynch to explore.

Even so, there is still a lot to enjoy in the film, not least Nicholas Cage's sublime rendition of 'Love me Tender'. Cage and Dern are excellent as the two young lovers, Sailor Ripley and Lula Fortune, on the run from Lula's obsessive, lunatic mom (Ladd). There are a few Lynchian – or, what we might call 'slipstream' – moments: a philosophical



ISABELLA ROSSELLINI IN BLUE VELVET



SHERYL LEE IN TWIN PEAKS

conversation about cigarettes; the scene where Johnny Farragut (Stanton), the private detective/boyfriend of Ladd, sent by her to track down her daughter, is tortured; a disturbing scene where Sailor and Lula come across Sherilyn Fenn, bloody and confused, the only survivor of a car smash; and Willem Dafoe's truly repellent performance as another of Lynch's bizarre villains, the rotten toothed Bobby Peru. The sound editing, cinematography and music are all uniformly excellent (throughout his career in film, Lynch has paid particular attention not just to the music on his soundtracks but to all the incidental sounds), with Lynch continuing his fruitful collaborations with Frederick Elmes (camera) and Angelo Badalamenti (music). This being Lynch, there is also the usual mix of explicit violence and black comedy, a lot of sex, and some great dancing.

I don't want to say too much about *Twin Peaks* (1990), the television series because this is, after all, meant to be a feature on cinema. Conceived in collaboration with Mark Frost, the first series was, to usurp a cliché, a televisual phenomenon, both in the USA and Europe. With *Twin Peaks*, Lynch managed to do for television drama what *Blue Velvet* had already done for film. Exploring a similarly dark terrain, the series follows FBI agent Dale Cooper's (Kyle MacLachlan, again) investigation into the murder of teenage Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) in a small town in Washington state. Full of Lynchian characters, dialogue and events, *Twin Peaks* was an unexpected success, utilising the directorial skills of such as Lynch himself, Frost, James Foley, Tim Hunter, Stephen Gyllenhaal and Diane Keaton.

There followed a second series in 1992, but Lynch's involvement this time was much less than on the original project, limited to directing only a couple of episodes. It seems that Lynch and Frost had wildly differing views on how to continue *Twin Peaks*, resulting in Frost gaining control over the television series, while Lynch went on to direct and co write (with Robert Engels) a prequel, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, which tells the story of the last seven days of Laura Palmer. While the film does have cameo appearances from some of the cast regulars, including MacLachlan, Catherine Coulson as the Log Lady, Dana Ashbrook as Bobby Briggs, Mädchen Amick as Shelley Johnson and Ray Wise as Leland Palmer, many of the other regulars are missing: Sheriff Truman, Audrey Horne, Josie Packard and Catherine Martell. While fans of the series may be disappointed at the absence of these familiar faces, what I find wearying is the way that Engels and Lynch use those regulars who do appear. Rather than adding anything new to our understanding of their characters, they seem to be merely going through the same old motions. Of more interest – apart from an embarrassingly inept performance from David Bowie – are the



guest appearances from the likes of Harry Dean Stanton, Chris Isaak, Kieffer Sutherland, Lynch himself and Miguel Ferrer, in that they provide an injection of dark humour and pathos.

It's hard to understand the indifference and even hostility that *Fire Walk with Me* provoked among fans of the series. While the film fails to tie up all the loose ends from both the first and second series, to expect it to have done so was to have expected Lynch to conform to the sort of dramatic conventions he rejected from the word go. Instead of bemoaning the fact that the mystery of Bob, the Red Room, the dwarf and so on remain unresolved, why not rejoice in Lynch's absurd and yet accurate representation of the banal nightmares of teenage life? While advance word on the film contrasted its explicit sex and violence with that of the censorship restrictions of the television series, it is the scenes of pathos and mundane, rather than violent, horror, especially from Sheryl Lee – who gives a moving and complex performance in a difficult role – that stick in the mind.

Lynch collaborated with Barry Gifford (writer of the novel on which *Wild at Heart* was based) on the script of *Lost Highway*. To describe the result as a thriller would be like describing *King Kong* as a tale of unrequited love – accurate enough in itself but it leaves so much out. Lynch himself has said, 'It's a dangerous thing to say what a picture is. If things get too specific, the dream stops' (*Sight & Sound*, July 1996), which seems to capture precisely the frame of mind needed to enjoy *Lost Highway* to the full.

There appear to be two separate narratives woven into *Lost Highway*, the first concerning Fred Madison's (Bill Pullman) deteriorating relationship with his wife, Renee (Patricia Arquette). Fred is a jazz musician who seems oddly detached from life in a way suggestive of a dreamlike state. A series of videocassettes are left on their doorstep, showing first, the exterior of their house, and then interior shots, including a scene of the couple asleep in their bedroom. At a party, Fred meets the Mystery Man (Robert Blake), who says they've met before at Fred's house and that 'as a matter of fact I'm there right now'. He hands Fred a cellular phone and there follows a surreal three way conversation between Fred, the Mystery Man at the party and that same Mystery Man on the phone at Fred's house. That the Mystery Man represents an incarnation of evil is confirmed by a vampiric allusion: Fred asks how he got inside his house; 'You invited me,' the Mystery Man replies. 'It's not my custom to go where I'm not wanted.' Like Dracula, his victims appear to make an invitation to their nemesis. The final videocassette reveals Renee, horribly murdered in their bedroom, and Fred himself, crouched beside her, covered in her blood. Fred is found guilty of her murder and sentenced to death.



LAURA DERN, WILLEM DAFOE IN *WILD AT HEART*



BILL PULLMAN IN *LOST HIGHWAY*

The second narrative strand begins in the condemned man's cell, when a prison guard finds, not Fred, but Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty) there. Having established that Pete has no connection to Fred, he is released and returns to his job at Arnie's garage. Pete is the favoured mechanic of local gangster Mr Eddy (Robert Loggia), and it is not long before he is involved in an affair with Mr Eddy's girlfriend, Alice (Patricia Arquette), who bears a striking resemblance to Renee. Soon, Pete is caught up in a scary world of drugs, pornography and murder. Alice/Renee provides one link between the two narratives; another is provided by Andy, who was the host of the party at which the Mystery Man talked to Fred. Andy may have been having an affair with Renee; certainly he has had dealings with Alice, and also with Mr Eddy. Alice manipulates Pete into killing Andy. Mr Eddy, alias Dick Laurent, also connects with the first narrative in that at one point Fred hears a voice on his intercom telling him that 'Dick Laurent is dead'. The truth of this is revealed when, after Pete has seemingly metamorphosed back into Fred (by this stage we assume that Fred and Pete are one and the same), we see Fred cut Mr Eddy/Laurent's throat in the desert, then drive back to his LA house and speak the same words into his own intercom.

To digress for a moment: Lynch specialises in particularly grotesque onscreen deaths. Think of Baron Harkonnen pulling the heartplugs on his victims, or the climax of *Blue Velvet*, where the corrupt detective remains standing upright postmortem in Dorothy Vallens's apartment; Bobby Peru in *Wild at Heart* falls on his shotgun and blows his own head off – it sails through the air and lands beside the already sickened Sailor; in *Lost Highway*, Andy is thrown across the room and encounters the corner of a glass coffee table head on. With his head impaled on the glass and his rigid body sticking out from the table, he resembles some sort of weird designer attachment which every home should have.

I said that Fred seems to wander round in a dreamlike state and Gifford confirmed this by describing the second narrative as Fred's 'psychogenic fugue' as he awaits execution. Not only is Pete a positive manifestation of Fred's wish to escape his rendezvous with death, but the Mystery Man represents the obverse – the darker side of his personality, his unconscious desire for blood and sexual violence given free reign. Fred might almost be an older Jeffrey Beaumont, and the Mystery Man the side of him that beat Dorothy Vallens, made explicit. But of course, this being Lynch, things aren't quite that simple. The ongoing police investigation into Pete and his connection to Mr Eddy, undermines the notion of this narrative as a fugue, as do the subtle hints at alternative endings, none of which are either credible enough to



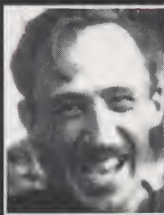
provide a sense of closure, or ridiculous enough to be dismissed. Almost inevitably, given its stubborn refusal to conform to Hollywood notions of what a genre movie should be, *Lost Highway* failed at the box office. I don't know if Lynch is bothered by this commercial failure, but what can be said is that he has survived his collision with the Hollywood machine with his integrity and artistic vision intact.

Way back in TTA1, Chris Kenworthy spoke of 'slipstream' writing as transcending genre fiction 'while operating in its wake'. I think the implication was that such writing conformed neither to genre or mainstream conventions, but that it occupied a space somewhere between the two. Kenworthy went on to say 'the weirdness...is grounded in the ordinary; everyday events take place in unordinary ways, and the familiar is made strange, with the impression that something is going on beyond our normal level of perception'. This seems to me to sum up precisely the filmic region that Lynch has chosen to explore in his best films, from *Eraserhead* right up to *Lost Highway*. They are not really horror or science fiction; they don't really function as noir or thrillers. They are something else. Slipstream, if you like. Which could be just another way of saying Lynchian.

#### FILMOGRAPHY

- 1966 **Six Men Getting Sick** [Moving Sculpture]  
director
- 1967 **Alphabet** [Short]  
director
- 1968 **The Amputee** [Short]  
director
- 1970 **The Grandmother** [Short]  
director, producer, writer
- 1976 **Eraserhead**  
director, writer, composer, editor, producer
- 1980 **Elephant Man**  
director, writer
- 1984 **Dune**  
director, writer
- 1986 **Blue Velvet**  
director, writer
- 1990 **Wild At Heart**  
director, writer
- 1990 **Twin Peaks**, 1st series [TV]  
director, writer, producer, actor
- 1990 **Industrial Symphony No.1**  
composer, director, producer
- 1990 **American Chronicles** [TV]  
director, producer
- 1992 **Twin Peaks**, 2nd series [TV]  
director, actor
- 1992 **Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me**  
director, writer, actor, producer
- 1992 **On the Air** [TV]  
director, producer
- 1993 **Hotel Room** [TV]  
director, producer
- 1994 **Crumb** [Documentary]  
producer
- 1996 **Lost Highway**  
director, writer, producer

## mat coward's twisted obsessions



Wouldn't it be terrible if the whole England football team suddenly decided to donate blood to the blood transfusion service at some stage during the last fifteen minutes of a crucial cup tie? Because the blood transfusion service requires you to sit down and rest for 'at least ten minutes' immediately after giving blood — it says so in all their literature — during which time the opposing side would have a chance to go into an unassailable lead of anything up to thirteen-nil. Or thirteen-one, if England had already scored from the spot during the first half, which would be better, but not a whole lot better.

Still, we won't worry about that now.

Like you, I spend a lot of time studying the film listings in *Radio Times*. And it used to be so easy, didn't it? Anything with an '18' certificate was likely to be suitable video-fodder. But now...well, it's more or less a full-time job, really.

'Contains violence and swearing' is a common tag to RT's capsule reviews, which doesn't tell us much. Is the violence truly appalling? Is the swearing novel and informative? 'Contains swearing and drug abuse' looks more promising, but I don't want to waste three hours of tape only to end up with thirty seconds of some hungover Swedish hitman swallowing six Disprin at once and saying 'Oh blimey, this is really a bastard headache what I've got here'. Do I?

'Slightly edited' is a perfect example of enigmatic taciturnity taken to pointless extremes, while 'Edited for some of its language and violence, and contains sex scenes and nudity' is frankly confusing. I mean, like, are the sex scenes and the nudity mutually discrete entities? Or do some of the sex scenes also involve nudity? Not that I'm prejudiced, or anything, I'd just like to know.

'Edited for some sex scenes and contains nudity' is even more unfor- givably ambiguous. What I'm wondering here is, if they've cut out the sex scenes, how come there's still nudity in it? Like, I hope it's not a film about people playing volleyball, because sports pictures, I find, are invariably disappointing as a genre. Or, possibly, 'Edited for some sex scenes' sounds like it might mean that the film has been cut in such a way as to actually accentuate certain sex scenes at the expense of others. Or with luck, at the expense of the volleyball.

'Contains swearing and some nudity' could just be, you know, 'Oh bugger, I've forgot to put me pants on again' sort of stuff. Likewise goes for 'Contains violence, swearing and nudity': 'Now look what you made me do, I forgot to put me pants on again. Take that!'


Leaving me frankly baffled is 'Edited for some of its language and contains violence'. Why cut out one, and leave in the other? Maybe the censor was tired after watching England lose thirteen-one, and he just thought 'Oh sod it, I'm off to bed. You coming, or what?'

And what's with 'May be edited for some of its violence', huh? Make your mind up, you big Jessie, or I'll chin ya. Ditto 'Contains mild swearing'. I mean, why bother mentioning it, then, for blooming heck's sake?

'Contains swearing and some violence' is clear enough: more of a treat for the cuss-fans than for the blood-lovers, yeah. Fair enough. I'm not going to lower myself to fretting about 'Contains brief nudity' ('Oh bugger, I've forgot to put on me — oh no, wait a mo, here they are'), but I just can't argue with this one: 'Slightly edited for content'.

I mean, okay, I like a bit of naked drug abuse as much as the next geezer. But if they're going to start showing blatant content pre-watershed then you really got to be asking: *who will defend our children against this tide of filth?* Yeah.





ROBERTA MURPHY

OWL NOISES



# CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT, I WAKE TO A WOMAN'S MOAN.

Bed curtains rustle as she moves out of sight. In sleep, I have crooked my left arm, as if to link it with hers. My skin, just below the elbow, still feels the impress of cold fingers.

An owl hoots, and I think that was the cry I heard, or perhaps it was the wind, always a trespasser up here in Castle House where fixtures are ornate but ill-fitted, gaps between window panes and sashes, doors not plumb, a lofty facade rotting within.

I have dreamed again of that Tuesday afternoon in Paris, a year ago, when Edwin and I attended the famous doctor's lecture at the Salpetriere. A magician's stage show, it seemed to me, female hysterics brought out to perform for an audience of journalists, *mondains*, and men of science. Hypnotized, the women believed what the doctor told them was so. One rocked and kissed and cooed over a bundle of rags, another screamed and started back from a tossed glove, a third got down on her hands and knees, purred, nuzzled the doctor's hand. I asked to leave, but Edwin said we must not miss the private tour nor offend his friend the doctor. As desirous to please as those poor madwomen, I acquiesced. It was the start of our honeymoon.

In my dream, one wearing only a hospital shift drifted onto the stage. She cast her eyes about the audience, her gaze loitering brazenly on the men, the tip of her tongue flicking between her lips. A sufferer from erotomania, the doctor informed us, Ophelia's disease that causes women to shed all the modesty natural to their sex.

*Watch what she will do.*

She came into the audience, to the row where I sat with Edwin, and curving her right hand to entice my husband, used her left to pull the shift down and bare her breasts. Edwin rose, pushed past me to embrace her, and all the gentlemen clapped and roared.

The dream contained a shred of truth. We did see such a woman, but only among the doctor's photographs. Edwin did look long at the series depicting the phases of her mania, but it was not their lewdness appealed to him. He asked the doctor many questions about equipment and technique, wishing to achieve similar photographic effects in his own field of ornithology. At last, he said, Can we see her? Unfortunately, she escaped, the doctor answered.

It was not she who accompanied me out of sleep but another, better known to me. Feigning renewal of an old friendship, she took my arm, and whispering "You must follow the path," tried to lead me back to the Salpetriere. Now she hides among the sumptuous hangings of this bed that used to be hers and berates me, though I had no hand in her unquiet death. "If only...if not..." the voice of my husband's first wife laments.

I reach for the little vial on the bedside table, a remedy for nervousness and insomnia. Ten drops, my physician instructed, before retiring. I measure double that amount. Lying back on the pillows, sucking my spoon, I await the laudanum's effect. Damask curtains and canopy glitter in the light of the candles I left burning. A leaf pattern woven in shades of green on a gold background mimics sunshot foliage. "Our treetop bed," my husband named it, the first night we slept here after the honeymoon, "where we shall be happy as larks."

I remember another bird, the tawny owl he showed me one morning, hunched in its roost, its head hidden under its feathers, assailed by the pecking beaks and whirring wings of angry sparrows. "They are paying him back," Edwin said, "for what he did to one of their kind last night."

# I FIRST MET EDWIN SINCLAIR'S SPANISH DOÑA AT

their wedding banquet, all the county's gentry invited to Castle House to celebrate his marriage, my family among them because so many of the rich patronised my father's church, though Edwin never. Many handsome men were present, but he excelled over all, nobility bred in his bones, health and wealth evident in his stature and dress, and a wealth of gold on his head too, an archangel's crown. If his grey eyes seemed distant, the irises somewhat opaque, I did not suspect emotional disability, a lack in his capacity to love. That aloof gaze increased the value of the prize I vowed to pursue on our first encounter: his notice and esteem.

When I befriended his wife, I did not think to replace her. I would have been content with his admiring glances and a partiality for my company. All the polishing and perfecting of my appearance and conduct I undertook for that harmless goal. She, in possession of a treasure, could not miss a few trinkets. I succeeded beyond my dreams. He made me his darling, his idol. Now, like her, I lie alone.

I leave the bed, put on over my nightgown the robe of China silk my husband bought for me when I was still a bride and he still a giver of gifts, all as lavish as this red robe, its flowing panels richly embroidered — fans, orchids, snakes. When he tossed it across my lap in our Paris suite, he said, "It's the latest fashion here. Wear it tonight. I shall like to feel silk slide against my skin when I embrace you." I have worn it to his satiety, and paid its price tenfold.

I don't look in the cheval glass as I cross the room. A wan, wild-haired creature would appear there, like those women I saw when we took our tour of the Salpetriere wards. Hysterics, neurasthenics, puerperal maniacs, the doctor brought forward proudly. *See how docile they are. 'Twasn't always so. My new treatment controls their seizures. Most of them will return to the world, to their families, biddable, cured.*

I seat myself at the high window on a brocade cushion and turn my face to the gardens of Castle House. The moon is full tonight. At full moon, I must be watchful, wary. Deep woods enclose the courtyard. From their gloom, my husband will emerge when owl-watching arouses his desire to imitate the hunters.

He took me into those woods for a ramble one afternoon, two years past, to hear the birds call, to see their nests and new laid eggs. She didn't mind, or pretended she did not, when he bade her stay; a long walk too taxing, he said, in her condition, lifting her feet onto an ottoman, kissing the top of her head.

From a nest in the oak boughs, he plucked a blue jay's speckled egg and, placing it in my palm, asked, If I were not already married, would you...? And I said, Yes, yes, with all my heart, and he said, so be it then, and shut my hand in his, pressing my fingers until they crushed shell and embryo.



Three months later, she was dead, and one month short of the twelve decreed to mourning his carriage arrived at our door. He had requested an interview with my father. Privately, my parents expressed shock at his haste to remarry, but how could they refuse for their elder daughter a match so illustrious? My father was a minister of the church merely, my suitor lord of the manor. Supremely eligible, he showed no symptoms of owl-sickness then.

Tonight, he has gone again to track the predators, to watch their mayhem. He is writing a book on owls, he claims, but I have seen no evidence of that. He provides a cover, an excuse, for the morbid obsession I have heard him mutter in nightmares — and when he returns, I, who am innocent, will suffer until exhaustion releases him into sleep. I am resigned. Prepared with laudanum. It is full moon. His malady waxes.

And when we wake in the morning, all will seem well between us. As well as my pretence and his faked forgetfulness can manage. *What will you do today, my love? Visit your Mama and your charming sister? Why does your sister never visit us now? You are not persuasive enough. Tell her I long to accompany her again on the piano. Remind her of the passion we share.*

And off, after breakfast, to the moors with his field glasses and notebook, or to his study's specimen cases and scholarly tomes, and another day will commence, tedious and drear, empty of true affection, but I shall be safe for its duration from bodily hurt.

I will pay no visits. Last time, my mother noticed too much, questioned too closely the blemishes under my eyes, the bruises to my throat. Certainly I will not invite my sister here. I know that look he casts on her. I was once its recipient, not so long ago, just one year since I was his new wife.

This high window reminds me of the hotel balcony over Lake Lucerne, a fragrant nook suspended between blue sky and blue water, tour boats gliding toward the ice-peaked mountains and painted chalets on the opposite shore. A mellifluous country of cow bells, cuckoo clocks, violins, music boxes, and every day a festival for the young bride and her handsome husband, wealthy and beyond generous, who turned women's heads, acquired dazzling smiles, sultry stares, wherever we went. In sunny, crowded squares and on the decks of the white steamers, in chandeliered concert halls and ballrooms, women watched him, envying me his adoration, his open-handedness, his gifts of shawls and jewels, fans and gloves, whatever took my fancy in the shops.

Every day, I went out into the world on his arm, to view yet another natural or man-made wonder, to gaze at the Jungfrau's piercing beauty through tinted glass, his hand clasping mine inside my muff, to watch music boxes carved and fitted with their delicate machinery, he urging me, "Choose, my love. Which will you have as a memento?" And at day's end, we returned to our secluded balcony in the scented dusk, the lake aglow with steamer lamps like will-o'-the-wisps, the sky bedecked too with pilot lights, to share wine and soft words, to dance to the waltz tune tinkling from my new music box.

On the eve of my wedding, Mama said, "Your first duty now is to obey your husband in all things, at night as

well as by day. Serve his wishes if you would be happy in marriage. The Queen herself has urged women to do so." But her advice was needless, obedience and service necessary bedchamber precepts for Queen Victoria and Mama, perhaps, but not for me. My husband was an adept lover, not through philandering like many men, but by the best and proper means, a widower who had learned already how to please a new wife.

Her portrait hangs in the music room. "I chose this setting," he explained, when we returned to Castle House, "because, you recall, she loved to dance here. You remember how I played the piano for her, how she taught me to strum gypsy tunes on her guitar, how vibrantly she performed the flamenco. I still hear the bells of her tambourine and the swish of her skirt. Her death was untimely and I sorely regret it, but if her presence disturbs you, I will have the painting removed to some remoter room. I would not wish you to imagine —"

I laid a finger on his lips, but not to stop his lies. I abetted them with fabrications of my own. "I was fond of her," I said, "and honoured that she chose to befriend me — a person of lower rank — and invite me so often to stay at Castle House, where I spent the happiest times of my life until..."

We smiled at each other, our eyes and lips counterpoint to our hypocritical tongues professing sorrow for the death he had surely contrived and I, unwittingly, enjoined with that 'yes' I gave him in the woods before he took her back to Madrid, where the cholera epidemic raged. Although, perhaps, before that, in their first-class berth in the *wagon lit*, he had spoken the killing words preceding the act, or tipped the poison in some hotel room where he'd ordered supper and champagne. Whatever happened, I had not foreseen it and had no part in her demise. I wound my arms around his neck.

"She does not disturb me, Edwin. Poor thing, I pity her. To die young is always sad. Yet, I think her blessed among women, too, for that year she was your wife." How garrulous I was in those early months. How profane, the minister's daughter, in her adoration. "I would gladly give up the rest of my life if that were the price of a single year with you."

"Come, don't speak so," he said. "I want you to live a century at least."

"I will live as long as you command, my lord."

Profligate words spoken soon after our return from Europe, and I heard no ominous portent in my vow, felt no jealousy then of another woman — my sister's visits had not commenced — least of all my predecessor, of whom he had said, "She did not suit me as you do. She was your shadow, a mere image of you."

That autumn afternoon in the music room, I listened to my husband play a Chopin waltz and returned the pensive gaze of the ringleted Spanish woman without guilt or remorse. As the gay notes skipped from his nimble fingers, I danced, my tafetta gown billowing blithely while the briers of obsession entangled my husband's heart, the portrait, the music, my dancing, all serving to remind him of a deed he had easily forgot in another country, one whose memory would incur guilt, yes, but also a guilty desire.





When he stopped playing, shut the piano lid, said, a trifle sharply, "Let's walk outdoors. We waste a fine day in here," I was startled but not disturbed. He was prone to quick shifts in mood, to change his mind, to tire abruptly of a pastime. I rushed to take his arm, to say, "Shall we ramble in the woods and see the birds?"

Later that day, we paid a visit to my family. My mother prevailed on him to play on our pianoforte. My sister sang. He praised her voice, and I, thinking to enhance one of his pleasures, said, "She should come to Castle House, Edwin, and you could enjoy duets together." So commenced my sister's visits. She was seventeen years old, less sophisticated and, in truth, less pretty than I. I foresaw no harm.

This fine June night is the eve of our first wedding anniversary. I sit at the casement, waiting for my husband's return. The fields outside our gates are hunting ground for the barn owl who nests in the stable eaves and flies forth at dusk screaming, as if it were victim not murderer. It also hisses, snorts, and barks like the hypnotized hysterics at the Salpetriere.

In our park woods, other owls reside, and perhaps Edwin spies tonight on the long-eared, its face a mummer's mask, its hunting halloo a hideous keening; or the tawny, whose cry is distinguishable for its quiver, a sign, I once joked to Edwin, of its mental disorder. "Tomorrow, the furies will attack him again, will they not? No wonder his nerves are unstrung."

He answered my jest gravely. "It is like a morality play. Those sparrows can be likened to the demons of remorse harrying the miscreant's conscience after debauchery."

Debauchery...our lovemaking has turned into that, for now the sweet kisses and amorous embraces of our honeymoon no longer satisfy my husband. There must be play of a different kind, requiring the Chinese robe and its scarlet sash or, sometimes, he brings into the bedroom the equipment he uses to trap and prepare birds for his specimen cases — the net, the dissecting knife.

And yet, I hope that he implied a wish to recover from his sickness when he attributed to the tawny owl a conscience. If he were to confide in me, if I swore to keep his secret and help him heal...it might not be too late. A marriage can be rebuilt on such a contract. Bride and groom can transform into penitent and confessor. He has no religious faith. Why should I not be priestess of his ills, keeper of his soul's health?

An owl hoots. The moon flits behind a cloud bank, peers through a gap like a face at a window, like my face, except it is a curious not a fearful watcher, eager for the spectacle to occur when the ornithologist returns to his starling and the midnight games commence.

For it is midnight. The hall clock chimes, and among the trees that border the courtyard, a cloaked figure prowls. My husband, dressed all in black to camouflage himself, a hood hiding his fair hair, a domino covering his face, his hands gloved. Not an inch of skin shows him to be human.



He emerges from the trees and slinks into full view, for all the world like a great black wolf reared on its hind legs. At the same time the moon quits the cloud bank and illuminates the courtyard. And I see the thing that lies draped across Daniel's left shoulder, silver-white like a dandy's opera scarf, and I know he has crossed another chasm in the country of his madness, performed a deed he never did before to one of that species. And if he, the owl-lover, has destroyed what he admires, what more, what new thing, is he capable of tonight?

I spring from the window seat, stopping only to snatch up a candle, and flee the bedroom to seek a hiding place. The front door opens and slams shut before I have gained the back stairs. He shouts my name. I hear him coming up the grand staircase. "I have a gift for you," he calls.

Down the stone steps I go, to the servants' quarters — what used to be the servants' quarters. He has sent them off to sleep in their own homes in town now that he needs privacy, secrecy, at night. Now the great kitchen and its adjoining rooms are all empty. I pass through them, one by one, until I come to a little pantry containing shelves and a storage chest. I can crawl under the bottom shelf, pull the chest by its handle until it conceals me. It will be hours before he thinks to look for me here. He will search all the upstairs rooms first. Daylight will come. His fit will leave him, as it always does, when the sun rises. I blow out the candle.

So...this is what it is like, to lie in a coffin. Or in a strait-jacket, when hypnosis fails and the patient goes berserk. I am in a space so narrow, my toes and the top of my head touch the pantry walls. It is pitch black in here, and soon I am beset by necromantic fears as well as a real one.

For now I fancy I hear the swish of a silk skirt, a woman's sigh, my name whispered in a Spanish accent, and an accusation: "How does it feel, to be where I am, where you and he have put me?"

Not I, I refute her. I knew...I *know* nothing.

I must leave this hiding-place and find one more suited to the living. Retrieving the candle in its brass holder, though I dare not light it yet, I feel my way out of the pantry and along the corridor. Stealthily, I go down the passage to my bedroom. Its door stands open. I peek into the room and see, by moonlight, my husband prostrate on the bed beneath the heaped covers.

I know where to go now until morning. His own study is the safest place, the only place he will never seek me should he wake before dawn. Among the telescopes and tomes and glass cases, with the stuffed birds, I will find sanctuary. Idiocy, he'd think it, to flee to his own lair. Because I play his games and never question, he considers me full of guile.

So I go up to the third floor and along the gallery, past the marble busts and family portraits, a mausoleum, she called it, when she took me there to show me her little atelier at its end, her 'birdcage'. Opposite her door is the flight of stairs I must ascend. ("He wants me nearby," she said, in the early days of my visits, when he still cared for her, "so that when he misses me he will not have far to come.")

I shut myself inside his study and look about. How eerie it is by moonlight, the stork-leg of the telescope, the stuffed birds — heron, merganser, quetzal, flamingo — eyeing me

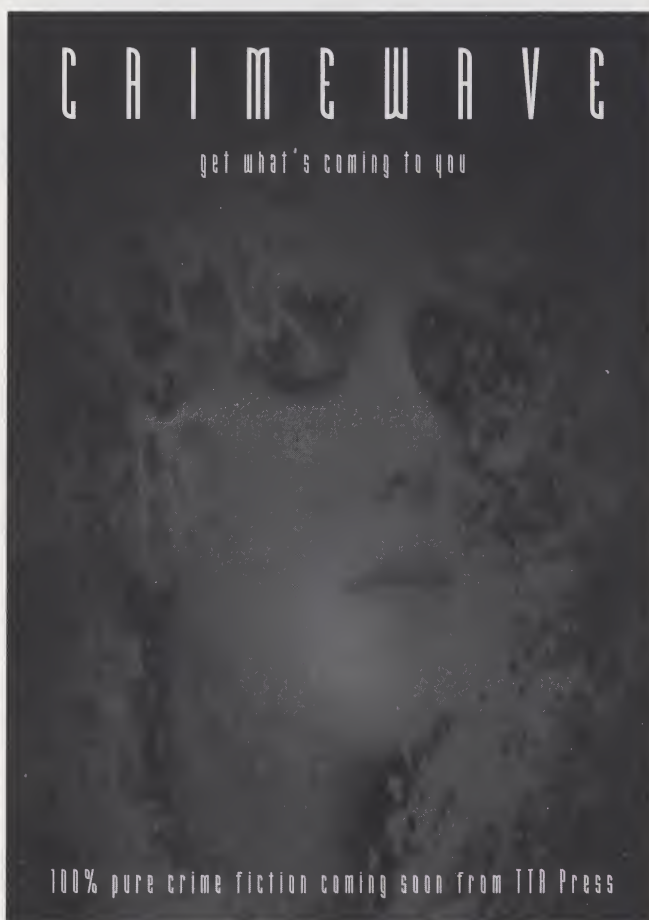
from their cases...and something else...something I can't see yet, but I sense it... How slowly my eyes move, unwilling to see what my brain already knows: I have deceived myself. It was I who heaped the bedcovers in my troubled sleep. Edwin is in the room.

His chair is turned away from me, to face his desk. I know he sits in it, and instead of retreating — what use? He would be upon me before I opened the door — I go forward, the brass candlestick raised. If one of us *must* die, why should it be the innocent one?


He is slumped in the chair, his cloak and mask removed, the owl's carcass still draped across his chest. His eyes stare at me in horror. As if *he* fears me! Blood still drips from the owl's throat. It has soaked his shirt and puddled on the floor at his feet. So I think, until I see what the feathers half conceal, and then I know the hunter's knife will never again flash before my face, its blade never again prick my flesh or be laid against my neck. I am safe forever.

**FACE TO FACE WITH THE ORNITHOLOGIST, A SPECIMEN** himself now, I hear the whirring wings of little birds. Their angry beaks assail me. I cover my head with my arms and utter owl noises — moaning, hissing, barking, a madwoman's screams.

**ROBERTA MURPHY** is a Welshwoman now living in America. She has published two novels in Britain with William Heinemann Ltd, and her stories have appeared in American magazines and in the *Best American Short Stories* anthology. She has fiction forthcoming in the *Georgetown Review*, and is working on a third novel.







# joel lane prison ships

## COMING BACK FOR A VISIT

made her realise she'd never felt at home here. They'd knocked down a couple of the roadside blocks, clearing the view across the flattened Lee Bank intersection. The taller buildings seemed to float in the shaky winter light, staring blankly at each other. Some other buildings had been cleared for demolition, or looked like it. But the north edge of the estate was looking better: frontages repainted in white and beige, the concrete panels on balconies gleaming like a child's teeth. Sarah had come back for the New Year weekend, to stay with her sister Rachel. They still had a spare room, because Rachel's two kids didn't want to sleep alone. Sarah thought she knew how they felt. It was nine months now since Andrew had got the job in Telford and she'd gone up there to live with him. There'd not been much to take with or leave behind. Telford was strange, like somebody's dream of a town that had been left unfinished when they woke up. There were pale shopping arcades as long as roads, and all the buildings looked the same. People had more money than round here, but they didn't go out. They worked and bought things and went on holiday and lived in debt. The streets were always empty. Which was okay for Sarah, who didn't like meeting people or going to pubs. She liked being with Andrew, but she didn't get on with his arrogant friends from the sales office. Lately, towards Christmas, she'd started getting low again. If she went back on medication, or if she didn't but got worse, she didn't know what would happen. Maybe they wouldn't have a child after all.



The first night she was back, Rachel told her what had happened in Stone House. Only a bare outline had appeared in the *Evening Mail*, to protect the victims and not interfere with the trial. The police had been crawling over the estate like worker ants for weeks in late summer. There'd been a party of some kind. Schoolkids on their own in one of the upper flats. Maybe it had got out of hand, but Rachel thought it had probably been planned to happen the way it did. Five girls in their early teens were gang-raped by eight boys. It went on all night. Some people had heard screams, but no one had done anything. The paper said the boys were aged between twelve and fifteen. What it hadn't said was that two of the girls were badly hurt, and one became pregnant. "One of the neighbours said she thought it was just a couple fighting. I don't know. Some people, if they can't see it, they don't think it's real."

Now that it was empty, Sarah's room felt smaller than before. Pictures and books had given it a kind of depth. Now there were only a couple of boxes, stuff from her childhood and school that she hadn't bothered to take with her. She drew the curtain across the barred window. Earlier today, she'd seen the rags of a floral curtain hanging out of a shattered window, soiled by the city centre rain. She undressed and climbed into the narrow bed. A few minutes later, the couple upstairs made the ceiling shake. The legs of their bed vibrated against the floorboards like a synth drum. A female cry broke out of the percussion — not loud, but involuntary. A few minutes later, she cried out again. Then silence flooded the air like a recording of sleep.

She hadn't told Rachel about her birthday party in November, the real reason why she'd opted to come back to Birmingham for the New Year. She'd got very drunk, and just before midnight five of Andrew's mates had decided to give her the bumps. She'd said no, but been too disorientated to resist. It felt like they were pulling her apart. Their strong hands on her wrists and ankles, one of them gripping her neck to stop her throwing up. Then she was on the floor, two of them lifting her up, taking the opportunity to paw at her skirt and blouse. Andrew was looking away, just so he could tell her he hadn't seen anything. She'd screamed the place down, then curled on the floor with her face in her hands and vomited. That night was when things had started to go wrong for her and Andrew.

**THE THIN MORNING LIGHT MADE THE ESTATE** shiver. Unbroken windows were dazzled. While Rachel went to Five Ways with the kids to do some shopping, Sarah walked sleepily through the trees and the children's playground at the end of Rickman Drive. A poster selling Peter Andre unpeeled from the side of the pub, then jumped back: face, blank, face. It was colder than she'd expected. At the back of one of the ten-storey blocks, exposed to the sunlight but sheltered from the wind, was a row of flattened shops. Newsagent, off-license, hardware, chemist. She'd worked at the chemist's for a while a couple of years ago.

Jean was still working behind the counter. She looked heavier than before, her face pale and swollen. A male assistant Sarah hadn't seen before was arranging a display of painkillers. As Sarah approached the counter, Jean stared uneasily at her, then smiled. "Oh, it's you. Thought you'd moved away."

"I have. Just back for a visit. How's it going?"

"Fucked. It's all closing down round here. David's trying to get a lease on the Pershore Road. Selling condoms to prostitutes. Make a change from selling inhalers to schoolkids on glue." Jean cast a sarcastic eye over the cramped shelves. "Things that happen round here, you wouldn't believe. The *Mail* won't print the truth, in case some local businessman complains it's putting off tourists."

"I heard about what happened in the summer. Those girls."

"What's going on, Sarah? This place is a factory of crime. I don't believe in coincidence, do you?" Her mouth twisted in a mime of broken illusions. "The boys who did that. Even if they're convicted, they'll be out in a year or two. It'll make all the other ones think there's nothing to it. Tell you what *should* happen. It's not just me, ask any decent person around here, they'll agree with me. Those boys should not be released unless they agree to be castrated. They won't do it again, will they?" Laughter swelled in Jean's mouth, but didn't emerge. Her eyes cut across Sarah's face. "Don't tell me you think they're not to blame."

She didn't need this. "Jean...look, I don't believe in cutting people's bits off. It makes them less than people."

"They're already less than people. Do you want them out on the streets? Or living in the same block as you? That's like sharing your house with them." Sarah thought of Nash House, her years of feeling unsafe, and smiled. "You think it's funny? Let me tell you something. The Government pretends it's anti-crime. But it won't castrate rapists. You know why not, Sarah? Because that would slow down the race mixing. Most rapists are darkies. Listen. Take a good look at Michael Howard's face, you'll know whose side *he's* on."

Jean hadn't changed. There was no point arguing with her. What she needed wasn't political enlightenment, it was a life. Sarah bought a few items and left. Going back up Rickman Drive, she realised she'd forgotten to invite Jean to the New Year party. Never mind. Across the Lee Tavern car park, two kids were playing swingball with a ball attached to a piece of scaffolding on a traffic cone. Envelopes of brown metal were riveted across flat windows, turning buildings to dead hulks. *From the past until completion.* Well, she was out of here. The city could fuck itself in all its unfinished redevelopment projects.

As she crossed the pitted courtyard towards Nash House, sunlight flared in the upper windows. Sarah felt trapped and exposed at the same time. She decided to phone Andrew before tonight, promise him...what, exactly? That might put him off. *I miss you* would do it. She noticed the patterned metal guards over some of



the ground-floor windows. And like a parody of a suburban street, the cluster of brick garages with their windows boarded up. They were only used for storing junk and valuables; they were more secure than the flats. Some day, she'd have to decide between security and freedom. But when you had neither, they seemed like the same thing.

**AN HOUR INTO THE PARTY, SARAH BEGAN TO** wonder if her sister knew all these people. Were they friends of friends, or pure gatecrashers? Rachel was locked in an intense discussion with her new man, Carl, their mouths separated by a gauze of words. Guests were blocking the hallway, drinking in the kitchen, dancing slowly in the dim living-room where Rachel had put in a red bulb. Tricky was snarling his way down the long, twisted passages of *Pre-Millennium Tension*, Martina struggling to hold the thing together. It made Sarah think of her parents' rows. Earlier, Andrew's voice on the phone had sounded so close and yet so far away, like her own thoughts in the night. She wondered what state he'd be in by the New Year.

The children were stopping over with friends in Bordesley Green. Sarah drifted between the kitchen and the living-room, saying hello to people she knew but hadn't missed. The music changed to a dance compilation featuring Blueboy and Mark Morrison; the tempo quickened. Sarah was drinking Pulse cider spiked with large shots of Tesco vodka. Her body was dancing, but her brain was trying to hide. *Remember me*. The glass was cloudy with water droplets, like a bathroom mirror. She needed to lie down, but her bedroom was occupied by four teenagers sharing out pills. Maybe Rachel's room was clear. But Carl was following Rachel into her room, his hands on her waist. The door closed behind them.

Sarah hid in the toilet for a few minutes while her head cleared. It was 11:30. There was blood in the wash-basin, she didn't know why. When she came out, a man she'd slept with before Andrew gave her a bottle of White Dragon cider and started dancing with her. She rested her hands on his shoulders. Soon they were leaning against the wall, her face pressed into his neck. If he let go of her, the crowd would pull her apart. She felt his hand lifting her shirt, fumbling with the button of her jeans. "Wait, wait." He looked at her face and backed off. She rushed down the hallway and he tried to follow her, but more bodies stumbled between them and he either lost her or gave up.

The staircase outside the flat was chilly and grey. The only light came from weak security lamps set in the walls. Sarah fell to her knees as a metallic edge of bile cut her tongue from inside. Only a few drops trickled from her open mouth. She gulped the cold, damp air. As her vision cleared, she realised that she was not alone. Couples were pressed against the wall on the staircase and the landing, blurred together like knotted shadows. She could hear the sounds they made. As she walked past them down the stairs, they went on blindly struggling. A family of partial ghosts: hands, breasts,

voices, hair. At the foot of the stairs, a small child was waiting.

It was a girl, maybe seven or eight. "Will you help us?" she said. "There's no one around. Please. You've got to come now." In the dim light, her face was a mask of shock.

"What's happened?" Sarah asked. But the child turned away, leading her out of the building into the moonlit courtyard. Broken glass twinkled from the ground. Vertigo caught her as she glanced up at the windows of the opposite block, rising from the splintered trees. She was too drunk for this. Ahead of her, the girl was running along the line of garages. The door of the last one had been forced open. Inside, a light flickered.

The girl pointed. "In here. Quick." Sarah pushed herself sideways through the narrow gap. At once, a torch beam dazzled her. Someone pushed her knees from behind; she fell hard onto the concrete floor. The garage door screamed as it was pulled shut. Alcohol dulled the pain in her kneecaps and hands as she climbed back to her feet. The torch beam played slowly over her body. Five or six lighters wavered in the narrow room, like aircraft in formation. The garage was full of children. At least a dozen of them, boys and girls, no older than ten. All staring at her. They all had knives. From somewhere outside, Sarah heard a muffled cheer and some kind of singing. It must be midnight.

Sarah backed towards the door. Pale light flickered on steel. This would find its way into someone else's nightmares, via the local paper or the TV news. The hopelessness of it would become an image. She could feel the vodka in her gut struggling for release. The little boy with the torch stepped towards her. He raised a black-handled kitchen knife to her throat. Sarah stepped backwards, felt a brick wall imprint her with dust. Her head struck the ceiling and she had to lean forward. The children closed in, their eyes and mouths empty.

The boy dropped the torch. He touched her breast, then stepped closer and said "Comfort me." She didn't know what he meant. He stared at the hollow of her throat. Sarah put her hands on his shoulders; they were as hard as metal. She drew him closer. *It's okay*, she whispered. *It's okay*. His fingers scratched at her shirt, with nowhere to go. She held him tight. Then she pulled him under her left arm and drove his head into the wall. The knife clattered between her feet. A crack of light showed in the doorway. Sarah kicked at it and forced her way out. No one followed her. She walked across to Nash House. The doorway was still open.

On the dark staircase, she felt herself come apart. Unable even to find the door and knock, she huddled on the first landing. His face had cracked like a shell. She sat with her arms around her knees, listening. The silence drowned her own breath. All the couples had gone.

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by Steven  
Dennett

# A PERSON FROM INDIANAPOLIS

## A PROFILE OF KURT VONNEGUT

**K**urt Vonnegut is listening to the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. The music is rising steadily to a crescendo. Ten seats away a woman is talking to her friend. The music is getting louder, louder, the swelling strings building to the rousing climax, so the woman has to raise her voice for her friend to hear. And the music suddenly stops. She shrieks, 'I FRY MINE IN BUTTER!'

This is the kind of pratfall Kurt Vonnegut loves — and it duly takes its place in his latest novel, *Timequake*. 'People trust me most,' he once said, 'when I sound like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am.' This 'ordinary man' persona manifests itself in a delight in puncturing grandeur, and a consciously un-literary style. Hence, if he wants to fill a space with a doodle of his own asshole, he will. And if he feels like giving us a recipe for almond macaroons, why not? We've all got to eat.

Vonnegut's voice is littered with verbal ticks and repetitive riffs, veering from cheapjack sentimentality to crude, rude mechanicals. He is a warm-hearted trickster for whom all vanities, be they space missions or symphonies, are fair game; he must joke at life, because life is — in the words of Kilgore Trout, his sci-fi writing alter ego — a crock of shit.

Born in Indianapolis in 1922, Vonnegut started selling stories in the fifties to the American family magazines that flourished in those days. Back then, television was a big wooden box only the wealthy had; he was able to earn enough to give up his job at General Electric in Schenectady to write full time. While his first novel, *Player Piano* (1953), was a relatively ordinary techno-satire based on his old workplace, it was followed in 1959 by the wonderful *Sirens of Titan*. Here Vonnegut began to forge a unique style and develop his thematic.

*Sirens* is gaudily inventive and warmly comic, ladling out sentimentality — and the urgent message of our monumental tiny — in a simple language. Vonnegut distrusts the high falutin'; any seeming authority is just some attempt to make another feel stupid. The disarmingly direct voice is precisely suited to the major theme: the need for us to be in contact, to learn not to be alone. *Sirens* gives us Salo, the robot alien from the planet Tralfamadore, now stranded on Titan, who discovers the purpose of his mission. He is delivering a message to a far-flung civilization, and the message is: 'Greetings!'

In Vonnegut's universe, Salo's *raison d'être* is noble and kind. Just saying hello is okay. We must remind each other that we are here; each other is all we've got. As the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent preaches, if there is a Supreme Being, He certainly doesn't give a toss about us.

The novel is, in fact, itself a greeting, creating a place where all conflicts resolve. In a tour de force description of that bizarre contusion in space, the chronosynclastic infundibulum, Vonnegut 'quotes' from a children's encyclopaedia. This space-zone — where all contradictions fit together — is a place where everyone's Daddy is right. When Winston Niles Rumfoord flies his spaceship into it he gets scattered into wave form, and can see all past and future time in one go. It's a typical Vonnegut device of time-levelling which renders our conflicts and losses minuscule.

Vonnegut has always liked the long perspective; it's soothing, when shit just keeps on happening. And it's so easy to make horrible mistakes. In *Deadeye Dick* (1982), even a random gun shot into the air kills a woman. It seems every human act is violent; maybe we should just stay home and never go out lest we bring down a world, or someone's mum. Vonnegut in this mode is Kafka with custard pies.

But Vonnegut likes to identify the naiveté of technocrats as maximising our existential booby-trap; it's variously treated as a major or minor chord. The player piano of Vonnegut's first novel replaces human skill with mere mechanics; in



*Cat's Cradle* (1963), the instantaneous water-solidifier Ice-9 becomes a world destroyer; in *Timequake*, a building-design software application causes an architect to shoot himself — because it does everything he spent decades training himself to do.

The sublime scope of *Sirens* has since been recognised — David Pringle named it as one of the hundred best science-fiction novels, and The Grateful Dead even optioned the film rights. But Vonnegut's reputation was minor through the sixties: his books rapidly fell out of print and only various stints of teaching — and flogging Saabs — kept the coyotes from the door. Short stories became unsellable: print fiction had begun to struggle in the global village. And, since Vonnegut was assumed to be a sci-fi hack, his books weren't widely reviewed.

But in 1969 his career turned around; he became a best-seller and a cult author at the same time. His publisher Seymour Lawrence had rescued him, as he acknowledges, from the car-dealing scrapheap, to bring out *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Everyone knows this about Kurt Vonnegut: he was a POW under the Dresden firestorm. The experience only lightly underscored Vonnegut's fiction through the sixties, but eventually he felt able to tackle the subject. How he tackled it was the mark of his genius: 'All this happened,' the book begins. 'More or less.'

Gawky US soldier Billy Pilgrim — a thinly disguised Vonnegut — is captured and held in a POW camp in Dresden. One night, in February 1945, this beautiful historic city gets bombed to hell by the Allies. Billy is a long way underground. When he comes up he finds the city like the surface of the moon. Everything is white dust; everyone is dead.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* catapulted Vonnegut to literary and hippie stardom verging, ironically, on deification. He made a fortune out of 135,000 corpses, as he later dryly observed. What was extraordinary about the novel was not just what it described, but its fresh voice, its daring use of pulp sci-fi, and particularly its form: it is written in the telegraphic, schizophrenic 'Tralfamadorian' style.

With *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the reader has a lot of reconstructing to do. Vonnegut 'bookends' the story so as to give us some anchorage, a familiar voice; but after the first biographical chapter, chronological progression disappears. The reader, along with Billy, goes 'spastic' in time.

Some years after his Dresden experience, Billy becomes convinced he has been abducted by aliens from Tralfamadore — Salo's home in *Sirens* — and placed in a zoo. He has two great benefits: first, he shares a cage with the gorgeous Montana Wildhack; second, he comes to understand why the Tralfamadorians are generally a happy bunch while we humans waste so much time feeling our lives are like crocks of shit: Tralfamadorians see time all in one go.

They have, then, a big advantage: they can concentrate on the good bits of life; nothing compels them to look at the bad things. To them, we Humans are odd creatures, travelling on time like it's a straight line, only ever moving forward. We constantly lose everything: our dads, our teeth, our ability to parallel park.

When Vonnegut represents Billy's imagined non-linear life — using a technique of the literary avant garde, and the voice of a sultry and weary old-timer — it's just like a Tralfamadorian novel. So he must explain how to read it. Each clump of symbols is a brief urgent message. In the words of a Tralfamadorian: 'There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time.'

Our unlikely hero brings news of his discovery to mankind; the fact that he is one day assassinated is of no consequence — he knew that was going to happen anyway. So it goes. Nothing bad matters in the long run: when the twenty-two-year-old Vonnegut returned to the Earth's surface after the firestorm, he found a city like moon dust. But still a bird was singing: *poo-tee-weet*. Like a greeting.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a book you can read in a number of ways: a self-help manual; a collection of synopses for pulp novels; a laying to rest of ghosts. Or the most original, enigmatic war novel ever written. Whatever. Somewhere in there, as Vonnegut says, is springtime.

Vonnegut had struck a literary chord, partly through the daring modern form — the French didn't have the last word on avant-garde after all — and partly

**'People trust me most,' he once said, 'when I sound like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am.'**

**'Don't put things in your ears,' he would advise the awe-struck graduates. 'Your ears are just fine as they are.'**



through the challenge to categories his work suggested. The academic zeitgeist of postmodernism meant people with brains could talk about popular genre writers like Vonnegut. As cultural distinctions collapsed in a melting pot, Vonnegut became championed by hip young academics who stressed his relevance to the peace and love flower-heads. A new young audience started reading Vonnegut's now marketable back catalogue. They saw how, in *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut had invented a new religion — Bokomonism — which looked much like the hippie movement. Thus, Vonnegut suddenly found himself in demand as a Graduation Day speaker. (This shy, hippie grandad didn't have much counsel to offer: 'Don't put things in your ears,' he would advise the awe-struck graduates. 'Your ears are just fine as they are.')

Vonnegut gained respectability, money, fame — and severe depression. Making something out of pointlessness is an exhausting business; he declared that he wouldn't write novels anymore. Inevitably, he did — and the writing that emerged reflected an imagination moving through despair and out the other side. Vonnegut's form became more personal, cut-and-paste, and, some would say, careless: his flourishing distrust for decorum made his works appear as mere jabbing essayism, with fancy thrown in. In *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), the direct attacks on American society are savage, and there's no attempt at literary finesse — just a personal and often puerile barrage of funny, urgent messages. *Slapstick* (1976) is presented as an autobiographical, fantastic re-telling of his life growing up with his sister; it's affecting, close to the bone, but not the kind of thing to draw new readers into the Vonnegut fold. Instead, here was an author confident of an intimate, forgiving readership, and one who didn't want to be seen as objective commentator or all-seeing artist. Through the decade, Vonnegut would offer prefaces, essays, speeches and autobiographical collages, de-emphasising the imaginative heights. A friendly, raggedy mess was left: earthbound, nostalgic socialism delivered by a Hoosier shit-kicker.

Sharp-eyed commentators like Martin Amis saw that Vonnegut was flying less high, apparently deliberately, with his seventies work. But the metaphor of low-level flight takes on a special resonance with Vonnegut's 1985 venture, the bleakly funny *Galapagos*. A return to form, some said, and a book which used the lack, or loss, of flight as a central theme.

Flying high suggests what? Heroic artistry? Scientific ambition? God-like arrogance? All three are human vanities. Anyone who thought they knew what God wanted has almost always been pig-headed and cruel, Vonnegut complains. In *Galapagos*, the human future has more to do with swimming and farting than any kind of 'flight'. Glorious Epicurean that he is, Vonnegut imagines that a million years from now the human race has survived, but only as seal-like creatures lazing around on beaches breaking wind. It's a painless future. Vonnegut dazzlingly charts the chain of events: a holiday cruise round Darwin's old haunt coincides with a worldwide viral attack. The tourists are safe, and their particular gene pool, plus luck and resourcefulness, generates Mankind's watery destiny.

One particular response illuminated a common misapprehension about Darwinism: *Esquire* magazine said the novel was basically flawed, because no species has ever been known to de-evolve. But Vonnegut was writing about evolution. Evolution isn't teleological — it doesn't aim for something 'higher'. It doesn't have a target in its sights, unlike human brains — those three and a half pound blood-soaked sponges — which always seem to be firing a metaphorical gun. Biologist Stephen Jay Gould regarded the book highly, arguing that it was a *roman à clef* about evolution. Vonnegut, the novelist, got it scientifically spot-on.

But just as we can read Billy Pilgrim's experiences as fantasy — partly induced by a Kilgore Trout novel — so *Galapagos* has an unreliable narrator plotting our future. Who's doing the imagining is of great significance for Vonnegut. Here, the narrator — the ghost of Leon Trout, Kilgore's son — tells us that after desertion from the Vietnam War he lost his sanity for a while. We can understand the extrapolation as a defensive reaction against life's random dreadfulness: Leon had taken part in the My Lai massacre. Suddenly this story of furry fisher-folk is less speculative than symptomatic: Leon is locked in his own head, and we've been witness to a beautiful psychosis.

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### FICTION

- 1959 *The Sirens of Titan*
- 1963 *Cat's Cradle*
- 1969 *Slaughterhouse-Five*
- 1973 *Breakfast of Champions*
- 1985 *Galapagos*
- 1987 *Bluebeard*
- 1997 *Timequake*

### NON-FICTION

- 1974 *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfaloon*
- 1981 *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*



Now in his seventy-seventh year, Vonnegut increasingly laments a decline in literacy and the Arts. But his work has itself formed part of art's 'de-definition'. Vonnegut has used various gimmicks to undermine the staid and high-brow (number puzzles, daft drawings) and, as High Culture recedes, he has taken care to emphasise the humility and fragility of his art. *Hocus Pocus* (1990) is ostensibly written on random scraps of paper; in *Bluebeard* (1987), Rabo Karabekian paints pictures with paint that decomposes to invisibility. And, in *Timequake* (1997), an entire novel has disappeared — Vonnegut has, he claims, trashed it because it didn't work. 'Timequake Two' rescues the odd good bits from the first version, weaving them into what amounts to a parting gesture.

It's a technique which forces a resigned sigh from the reader; the book now seems obliged to acknowledge itself as faintly ridiculous, olde worlde, intrinsically a failure. Vonnegut allows a sense of loss to suffuse the disabled, *ad hoc* work; this newly multiform writing then seems to become more of an excuse for a get together. It's too late now for High Art, Vonnegut seems to be saying. Just come in for a little chat.

But don't be fooled, for work is what it is. *Timequake* is cunningly weighted, splicing autobiographical and fictional worlds with, once again, synopses of Kilgore Trout's energetically satirical stories: in one, he has the doomed Hitler playing bingo with Eva Braun in his bunker. Hitler wins.

Kilgore Trout and his pet parakeet, Cyclone Bill, have variously appeared in Vonnegut's fiction, but no authoritative Life of Trout is possible — as Philip José Farmer once discovered in trying to reconstruct it. Trout is reinvented at Vonnegut's whim; but broadly he is the author and loser Vonnegut could easily have become, the hack who only weirdos and obsessives rate. Vonnegut had set Kilgore free at the end of *Breakfast of Champions* (1973): he had 'looked for truth and beauty and didn't find doodley-squat'. But he's been a vagrant since 1975, and now Vonnegut rescues him in the twilight of both their lives, letting him see things out in a rest home for creative types — and with an extended family of friends who think he's the cat's pyjamas. Vonnegut, as Kilgore's creator, always had the power to make amends, so he finally does. It's as if he's making up for the utter indifference of You Know Who.

*Timequake* sits easily with Vonnegut's various autobiographical writing, reacquainting us with a family we've come to know well: sister Allie, ex-wife Jane, his old war buddy Bernard O'Hare. But they've all gone to heaven now.

The residual plot seems like a response to the pain, pushing despair into hyperbolic territory: It's 2001, Vonnegut tells us, and a 'timequake' hits Earth on account of the universe suffering a crisis of confidence — it wonders whether or not there's any point going on. Everyone gets sent back ten years to do the same stuff again, with no free will: if you picked the wrong lottery numbers, you will again. Tough. But when the timequake has run its course, human beings have a problem called Post-Timequake Apathy: they've forgotten they have to make decisions. Steer the bus, balance your legs, otherwise you crash.

It's subtly biting: in our cynical postmodernity, perhaps we should rediscover the courage to make choices? Kilgore, in fact, doesn't believe free will exists at all. But still he repeats his mantra after the timequake, helping the casualties gain a semblance of control: 'You were sick, but now you're well again, and there's work to do.' Clean up, make the world a better place? Yes, it's simplistic, but finely nuanced: Kilgore's words are in Vonnegut's terms a 'foma' — a harmless lie that makes people happier. A foma is a strategy for psychological survival. The concept of heaven is a foma.

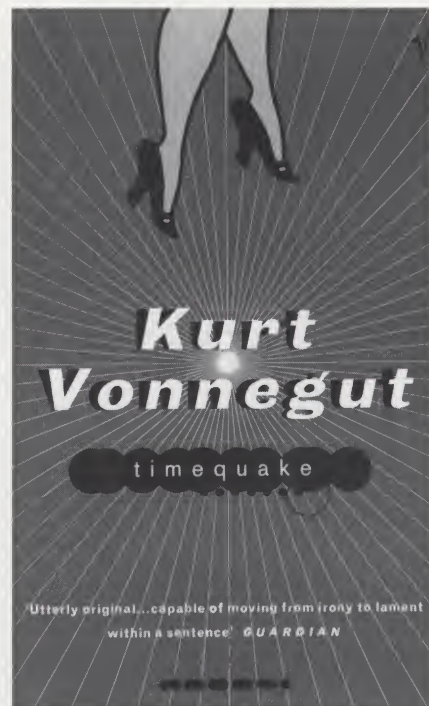
Vonnegut's achievement has been to expand the form of the novel, to use tricks of the literary high-brow and the allegedly sub-literate in the same long breath. His is a now antiquated adolescence, full of practical jokes in response to loss, fascinatedly charting the laughable pointlessness of Homo Sapiens. It's hard to think of any writer with so much damned good will, and his stubborn touchy-feely attitude gives even the mundane a sly, critical edge. In *Timequake*, Vonnegut describes at length his regular, shambling visits to the local post office. His wife nags him to save his legs and use the Fax. 'But we are here on Earth to fart around,' Vonnegut says. 'Don't let anybody tell you any different.'

## TIMEQUAKE

**Kurt Vonnegut**

Vintage paperback, 220pp, £5.99

see below for a free copy of this book



According to Vonnegut's alter ego, science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout, a global timequake will occur in New York City on 13 February 2001. It is the moment when the universe suffers a crisis of conscience. Should it expand or make a great big bang? It decides to back up a decade to 1991, making everyone in the world endure ten years of déjà-vu and a total loss of free will — not to mention reliving every nanosecond of one of the tawdriest and most hollow decades.

In 1996, dead centre of the re-run, Vonnegut is wrestling again with 'Timequake 1', a book he could not write the first time and will not be able to now. As he struggles, he addresses, with his trademark wicked wit, the relationship between memory and déjà-vu, humanism, suicide, the Great Depression and World War Two as the last generational character builders, the loss of American eloquence, the obsolescent thrill of reading books, and what 'extended family' really means.

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We have copies of *Timequake* to give away to the first ten current TTA subscribers who send in the correct answer to this simple question: **WHAT IS THE NAME OF KILGORE TROUT'S PARAKEET?**

See also our similar offer on Christopher Priest's new novel elsewhere in this issue, and please turn to our other special offers listed on page 5



## Rick Cadger's unquiet soul

I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever manage to write again...and I think the editor was wondering something similar. As if to confirm my growing fear that my productive days were over, my domestic life recently took on a distinctly drastic, bizarre and near unbelievable complexion. Still, despite living in the middle of a soap opera (a particularly far-fetched and ludicrous one at that), things seem to have settled down enough to allow me to get this column written – and, of course, an impatient note (or several) from the editor is also a great motivator.

Motivation; that's the hard part, isn't it? When I was younger I was a big sci-fi, horror and fantasy fan. Books, mags, movies, TV – it didn't matter what the medium was as long as the content was weird. When I started writing, my enthusiasm was enough to fuel my labours, and inspiration flowed like a river. Time passed, and over the years my love of the strange has metamorphosed into something very different from the naive escapism that characterised it in the beginning. While the outrageous and the odd still inspire me, these days there must be some relevance, some link to the reality human beings experience every day (strange then that everyday life is also the thing that seems determined to make it impossible for me to actually do any writing). Magic and dragons, spaceships and empires, vampires and zombies: none of these partnerships holds the same instant appeal for me that it used to, and my reading in the more traditional sf/f/h vein has all but petered out. Things change. Sigh.

A few weeks ago I made a painful decision and deleted a novel that was all but finished. This was the third complete draft and ran to about 130,000 words. The idea was pretty good and the story was pretty good – in fact, it had been the basis of a short story that did very well for me a few years back. Sadly, I don't seem to be the same Rick Cadger as the one who started writing that book, and my current incarnation didn't see anything of particular value in it save a neat idea for a fantasy/horror tale. No doubt I will live to regret this episode of bridge-burning; but for now I will take advantage of the clean, blank (argh...panic attack!) page on my word-processor and start work on the new novel that has sprung almost fully-formed to my mind... Yeah, right.

Ah, it's all crap, you know. I can try as hard as I like to produce something worth-

while, but it will make no difference at all in the end. What seems to matter, when it comes to getting books published is not whether they're any good, but rather that they are potential million-selling blockbusters of the kind currently in vogue, or the sort of easily-digested snack reading that finds its way onto the coffee tables of the kind of people I'd love to slap very, very hard. This isn't the voice of the bitter, despondent writer of unpublished novels that you are hearing; it is the voice of the bitter, despondent reader who is sick and tired of hunting in vain for something worth reading. If I was writing *The Small Book of Inane, Contrived and Completely Bullshit New-Age Relaxation Techniques* as given away free with low-fat sunflower margarine (doh, just don't ask – I'll only lose my temper), I'd be onto a winner. But I'm not. I'm trying to write something that I can be proud of... All right, who laughed?

As for that clean, blank page I mentioned, it really is a sight that fills me with dread. Finding the right place to start a story always seems the hardest part to me. Oh, and endings too, of course; they can be a real problem. And that bit in the middle that kind of links the beginning and the end together...I usually have difficulty with that as well. As if the prospect of starting a whole new novel wasn't enough cause for terror, I just realised (literally as I typed the opening

of this paragraph) that I haven't actually written a word of fiction in months. Oh no... Now I'm really sweating. I have only one story currently awaiting publication, rather than the usual three or four. Unless I get some more written pretty sharpish I'll sink still further into obscurity. Taking a break from writing is a big mistake. It doesn't give the creative 'muscles' a chance to recuperate; rather it allows them to atrophy. It is just like the man said, if you don't use it you'll lose it. I know from experience how hard it can be to get back into the productive frame of mind after a long hiatus, whether that productivity is of a literary nature, or the less glamorous labour of the day job. The solution to this wasting condition is simple: keep slaving away without so much as a pause to mop the sweat from your brow...or, in the case of the day job, quit altogether.

You'll have to excuse me if I wind this up now, but I've just been struck by a bolt of inspiration. An idea so exciting that it is irresistible – I simply have to get it down on paper before the muse deserts me. I can see it all clearly, the beginning, middle, end...every word! I can't think why I didn't write it before. Okay, here goes:

Dear Sir,

I wish to give you notice of my resignation...

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## wayne edwards's overdose

The educational system in the USA is...what to say? Uneven? Sad? Fucked? Those all work. Detailing all the shortcomings of educational endeavor is task beyond my endurance. What I will do is offer a little bit of commentary and maybe an anecdote.

First of all, here is the progression of education in the US. There are public and private schools, of course, and some variation on the list provided, but for the most part, this is the ordeal we go through in the States trying to learn.

### **Mandatory:**

1. Elementary School (6 years)
2. Middle School (2 years)
3. High School (4 years, mandatory through age 16 and most graduate at 18)

**Optional** (mandatory if you don't want to drive a lorry [a fairly high-paying job here] or pray for a high-paying [but scarce] union job in manufacturing) – University-level:

4. Undergraduate School, Bachelor's degree (4 years, more for chronic inebriates)
5. Graduate School, Master's degree (2 years, typically)
6. Graduate School, Doctoral degree (4–5 years, maybe more)

### **Sheer Lunacy:**

7. Post-Doctoral study (no 'normal' degree offered, could go on indefinitely) Nearly everyone finishes High School. Almost 70% go onto to universities (or Liberal Arts Schools, or Community Colleges, etc), but there is a fairly high attrition rate with about 40% receiving degrees. Maybe 15% go on to graduate school, but most drop out before finishing a doctoral degree (I am in my fifth year of a doctoral degree where 88% of the people I started with have dropped out or decided to settle for a Master's degree). Some fields actually require work beyond doctoral study, mostly research, before there is any real hope of gainful employment in that area.

With all this time being spent in school, you would think that the US is enjoying a relatively well-educated population. Yes, a reasonable person would think that. What has happened instead is that educational requirements for jobs are being bid up while the quality of education is deteriorating.

For promotion in many jobs, a University degree is required, sometimes an advanced degree. While a causal relationship is hard to establish (at least the direction of causation), the private-sector reaction is probably a response to the idiocy observed in High School graduates. Since many of them cannot form a coherent thought or write a com-

plete sentence without help, you raise the bar to University graduates. Therefore, demand increases for people with Bachelor's degrees.

In order to keep the Academic Machine moving along at a good clip by graduating more and more students to meet the surging demand, the scholarly requirements have been systematically lowered over the years. Material has been removed from programs of study. More general (and simpler) textbooks have been adopted. And when these strategies failed, the grade scales were liberalized so that more people would receive passing marks for inferior performance. This phenomenon occurs at all levels of University study. Take for example the doctoral program I am in, Economics. I won't mention the name of the university because the practice is widespread. When I entered, a year and a half of core classes (theory) were required, two years of field classes (specialization areas), and dissertation. Now, the core is still required, but the field requirements can be met in a half-year and the balance can be made up by dissertation (of the same length as previously required). When the students who came after me are finished, they will have the same degree I will. The result is that university degrees don't mean what they once did. Mostly what they do represent is that the person holding the degree put in some time and money to buy his degree.

It gets a lot worse, of course. After all, the people teaching Mandatory Education to youngsters have University degrees. I have long thought that the University students I teach are underprepared (at large Universities, many of the undergraduate courses offered in the first two years of study and some more advanced ones are actually taught by graduate students rather than professors). If the value of the fundamental education they receive worsens because of the degrading quality of higher education, they'll be even more so.

Consider the following story published in the national newspaper *USA Today* this summer:

'BOSTON – The plan seemed sound. Massachusetts would join other states that give reading and writing tests to new teachers. The exam would weed out the poor ones and raise the bar of excellence in public education. Then the test scores came in. Dismayed officials found that 59% of those who took the first test in April failed to meet the new standard. The solution for now? Lower the bar. The Massachusetts Board of education voted Monday to reduce

the passing mark from what a special panel of educators had suggested: 77%. Its new passing grade is 66% – a grade any school kid will tell you is a solid D.'

Later in the article:

'Applicants...were asked to summarize an article about the Constitution. One wrote, "James Madison was the Father of the Constitution. But he was no good at notes. He wrote a lot of notes on the debates [sic]. But also left some stuff out. What we will never know. In the convention, delegats [sic] had to debat [sic] and compermise [sic]. 42 people did not sign and thanks to James Madison we will never know, why?'"

This from a University graduate who hopes to teach children in the US to read and write. God help us.


Let's pause for a moment to have a reality check. There are some fine schools here in the States (I am not at one of them). The problem is there aren't enough. Simple economic analysis tells us that where a profit potential exists, organizations will move to exploit it (did you see me usin' my fancy book-learnin' there?). Fifteen years ago this approach lead to the proliferation of the most useless degree on the planet, the MBA (Master of Business Administration), in such large numbers that it seemed you couldn't swing a dead cat without hitting someone with the degree. Marginal schools, and even some reputable ones, starting cranking out graduates in record numbers with little regard to what the graduates had actually *learned*. And the trend continues.

I wish I could think of some solution to this self-perpetuating cycle, but the continued refusal by administration officials to admit or often even address the problem makes the beast appear unstoppable. Here is one more example of the scope of the problem. The same course at a school is often taught to different students by instructors of vastly different abilities. Compare an introductory Economics course taught by a professor with a history of distinguished teaching and scholarly accomplishment to one taught by a graduate student who has never taught anything before. There is not a single University in the country that will admit the quality of education is different in these two cases, for if they did, students might at least insist on paying lower tuition if they were being serviced by another student. Wouldn't you?

Keep all this in mind when it comes time to consider whether you want to send your children abroad for University education. They are probably better off at home.



# THE DOLL THIEF



Steve Rasnic Tem



**HE CURLS INTO THE ROOTS OF THE TREE** PRETENDING to read the book he's found in the garbage. The cover is warped from moisture, or from hard use, he can't tell which. He imagines some office worker coming to the park each day during the lunch hour to read the book, then throwing it away after the final chapter. Now Flint has this dilemma: does he throw the book back into the waste-can when it has served his purposes, or does he take it home? The idea of throwing away such an important item as a book offends him, but he really has no space for all the things which demand his attention during a day, especially something he is unlikely ever to use again.

He hefts it in his hand, turns a few pages, reads scattered passages. *There is still life here*, he thinks, breathing into the spine and rubbing the cheap, rough paper. *As much life as, surely more life than many people I know*. And he makes it a practice never to throw anything away that has life in it. Even if other people can't see the quiet vitality in such a thing, he can. He has a gift. The pages flutter anxiously, eager for his touch.

A few yards away two beautiful faces bob in play, hovering only inches above the grass. Giggles and shrieks, followed by yet another tumble down the slight slope. Close at hand, the parents continue to pack the picnic gear away, now and then pausing to admonish with a word or a glance.

The small faces pop up, breathtaking in their perfection. Exquisite use of detail. It isn't often he encounters such craftsmanship. The parents must be quite proud. Little ones bring context and meaning, where before it had seemed meaning was out of reach, part of some other life. Living without these pretties is like living without mirrors, with no opportunity for reflection.

A pause in play as they suddenly gaze in his direction. Flint hides his face in the book, seeking to befuddle any eyewitness accounts. The pages smell sourly of decomposing tomato and mayonnaise. Suddenly a piercing cry, and one of the exquisite forms squalls back to mother. A flurry of activity and blood is discovered. More cries from the lovely and undertones of urgency from the adults. Flint eyes that stretch of grass and imagines he sees the bits of broken bottle, even a redness clinging to the one upraised sliver, but he's too far away to be entirely sure. The child is bundled up and carried expeditiously to the waiting car.

Flint tosses the book into his canvas duffel bag, imagines he hears its fragmented spine giving up, disintegrating. He tugs the drawstring tight to muffle spilled conversation.

Flint waits until the vehicle leaves, waits longer in case it turns and comes back, waits longer still just to be sure and calm about what he is about to do. Eventually he climbs out of the tree roots and strolls across the grass. A few words tumble past his feet as he makes his way toward the beautiful form that lies still giggling in the grass, but he pays little attention. Some things, most things, are well beyond words.

"They've left you behind, my sweet," he says as he helps her into his arms, and still she giggles like a silly tramp, until muscular fingers tighten across her chest and crush her voice box. "Lovelies are better off silent," Flint admonishes, tucking her safely into the crook of his elbow.

As he makes his way through the trees and down the hill to the waiting car some women smile to see a man carrying such a lovely doll. A few joggers wave as they trot past the car, seeing the old man fitting his granddaughter so carefully into the car seat.

#### "THERE WE ARE AND THERE WE'LL BE, MY SWEET."

Flint props the doll up on his desk blotter, carefully arranging the folds of her dress so that they drape just so. *God is in the details*, he thinks, not for the first time this day. He is constantly amazed by how few people seem able to grasp that simple yet all-important concept.

Flint tugs the blouse over the chubby arms and swollen head of the doll. Like most doll clothes, the outfit has been made too tight — not enough room for limber movement. When he inserts his large hand inside her clothing, the seams threaten to split.

Flint examines the exposed pliable belly. He puts his nose there and allows the sharp chemical odour to fill his nostrils. The strength of the odour tells him this is a relatively new doll. This pleases him for he likes that new doll smell. It's quite unlike the fresh smell of babies but it is unique in the way that a baby's smell is unique. It fills him with a longing he's never been able to describe.

He removes the doll's skirt, socks and shoes, and studies the construction. He's pleased to see that there is no cloth in the body, no seams or markings, and that all the joints work, maintaining the illusion. Some dolls lose all pretence once their clothes are removed. Characters once so sharply defined dissolve, and you are left with but a vague dream of a relationship with this small creature, which may not be retrievable even when the clothing is replaced.

This isn't to say that Flint does not at times enjoy the abstraction a doll might represent. Sometimes it is precisely a mask he desires, the face which isn't a face but still manages to give eyes and expression to an indifferent universe. At those times he is pleased to discover that a lonely person might still find solace in the company of the inanimate.

But he has discovered through years of experimentation that realism better fits his emotional and physical needs. Most importantly in the eyes, but the mouth, even the ears have the power to move him significantly as well.

"For you see, the most important thing, really," he tells her, taking up the knife, "is getting the details *right*," splitting her up the middle with the thin edge of the blade. Quickly he pushes his face through the slit into the abdominal cavity before any gases can escape. For a moment he thinks he might pass out, but with a struggle he maintains consciousness. He opens his eyes into the warm pink glow of the doll's insides, the light passing through his windows





imaginatively transformed by its passage into the doll's new flesh. Suddenly the inside of the doll expands until it is a world far larger than his own puny rooms, and he discovers that it is a warmer place than any he has ever known. Children are playing close by with a kind of music in their voices that will be gone in only a few years' time. When finally they approach him he sees himself in their eyes, and there he is a far better creature than he could ever have imagined.

When Flint climbs out of the doll — minutes, perhaps hours, later — its perfect form is in pieces scattered throughout the apartment. He tries for a time to pull things back together, gives up when he decides too much is missing.

**HE GOES INTO A TOY STORE WHERE THEY KNOW** him, where they have suspected him of theft for years but have never been able to substantiate anything, however closely he might be watched. He knows this very well, and enjoys having them watch him, enjoys playing games with them they cannot possibly understand.

The dolls sold here are nothing special, certainly nothing that should interest a connoisseur such as himself, but despite himself he is intrigued by the selections. It is the presentation more than anything that draws him. When he takes the dolls as he usually finds them — from parks, from playgrounds, off front porches and out of unlocked cars — he doesn't see the packaging. But there are things to learn from the boxes and their advertising, markers which provide insight, *she wets she cries*, she dies. They all die, end up in some trash heap somewhere, as we all do, and yet that never appears on the packages, however logically it might fall into the sequence. *She wets! She cries! She dies! Hours of fun as she aspires, turns blue and twists side to side foaming at the mouth! Tracheotomy kit sold separately.*

"That one, she's my favourite. Messy Betsy." Flint looks down at the source of this small, sweet voice, and the child looks up at him with perfect eyes. "Do you like her?"

"I..." He looks at the child more closely, sees the lopsided nature of her face, the crooked mouth. Everything about her saying that something is wrong here. Most would think of her as an ugly child, nothing like a doll at all. And yet she takes his breath away, precisely because he has never seen a doll like her. Her face is so *alive*, possessed of a vitality quite beyond duplication. "I like her very much, very much indeed."

"She's special," the girl says solemnly, gazing at the baby wrapped in thick, clear plastic. The bag too tight for the doll, he thinks. The soft face wrapped like meat, pressed against the plastic to the point of distortion. 10 inches, 8 ounces. \$14.95.

Flint gazes around the store nervously, sees one of the clerks eyeing him, then looking away a bit too obviously. "Where are your parents?" he asks the girl.

"In the furniture store. I'm supposed to keep occ, occa..." "Occupied?"

"Yeah." She smiles gratefully. Flint wonders at the oblivious nature of some parents. Don't they ever watch the news? Or read anything other than the TV schedule? Some people simply cannot imagine anything dark entering their lives. Some people cannot imagine anything else.

"Don't go anywhere, okay?" he says. "Don't leave the store. Don't walk off with anyone."

"You mean strangers? You're a stranger." She looks vaguely alarmed. He feels like touching her shoulder, her cheek, but stops himself.

"Yes, I'm a stranger. But I won't hurt you. And I'm not going to ask you to leave with me." He thinks about buying her the doll, but knows it would be a foolish thing to do. "Why don't you look at the other dolls until your parents get here? They have lots of pretty dolls here."

"'kay." The girl walks over to the next aisle without looking back, as if she's already forgotten him.

He is leaving the store when the clerk stops him. "Sir, could I...see what you have, in your pocket?" Flint looks at him blankly. The clerk's face is too red, badly painted, completely unrealistic. The voice halting, lacking fluidity. "The pocket you have your hand in, Sir."

Flint looks down. He wasn't aware. He almost smiles as he withdraws the hand, the tattered photograph dulled from constant rubbing clutched between his fingers. He hands it to the clerk who examines the picture with a bewildered expression. *Nicely done*, Flint thinks. *They got the lips just right.*

"I'm sorry," the clerk says, but Flint understands that the clerk has no idea where he made the mistake. The clerk tries to smile as he hands the picture back. "Your daughters, right?"

Flint looks at the two pale figures in the photograph, the faces worn almost completely away. "They used to be," he says. "They're gone. Mud babies now."

**FLINT UNWRAPS HIS LATEST FINDINGS**, rolls them out onto the workbench, their hollow heads clunking together like coconuts. A pile of

opened mouths. The doll show had been poorly guarded, almost no security. Who would want to steal a doll? But the more valuable dolls are probably insured and can be easily replaced, he thinks without really believing it.

He hasn't always been interested in the more collectible items. But then he started reading the catalogues and the articles in the doll magazines, and he was intrigued by the way the owners talked about their expensive pretties. In this batch are a nice infant Googley, a Steiner, Heubach, Schoenhut, Bru Jne, Kestner, and a couple of old leather babies. He holds up a small blonde doll a bit over a foot in height, dazzling white complexion. "'With such naughty eyes a young girl might grow ashamed to own her.'" He laughs. He looks around the room, lined floor to ceiling with shelves, for a place to put her. By the kewpies? Next to that rag doll made from a dead child's pajamas? He remembers how he found the tall one with the royal blue paperweight eyes, under a bridge in a dead homeless man's





arms. And that one with the closed mouth and deep-punched dimples, underneath the slide in the playground, its broken head full of sand. And that one with the curious mouth, and that one with laugh lines moulded sixty years ago, lying together in an old lady's cupboard after they'd taken her away in the ambulance. And the shy-faced one with the watery green eyes, the flawless creamy bisque, the organdy and lace ensemble, Mona Lisa smile, completely articulated body, fully-stocked wardrobe trunk, wide sleep eyes, wig in blue mohair, perfect lashes, tiny curls, with original matching shoes in the original box. The papier-mache boy with flirty eyes flicking rapidly corner to corner. The shimmy doll who gyrates merrily each time Flint enters the room.

From up on the shelf his girls gaze down at him sleepily. They murmur to themselves. "Hush, don't fight your bedtime," he tells them. "Tomorrow will be here soon enough." He puts the new faces away, is pleased by the way they all look at him with their various eyes. He gets out his tools, his boxes of parts. "You want a story to help you sleep? I found this book the other day. Then Daddy has to get back to work."

He retrieves the tattered paperback with the warped cover from his duffel bag. Its garbage smell has intensified, so that now it reeks like the corpse of some small creature. He starts reading to them paragraphs at random, seeking out the most flowery descriptions, just as he did when they were very small, before they could talk, before plot with its awful passage of time mattered to them. Back then they were content with the pleasures of the moment, and in that too brief moment they had their father and he had them.

His babies are asleep now. He can hear their slow and easy breathing, their understated but steady heart beats, although he cannot tell into which doll bodies they have retreated. They move their habitations about at whim, playfully, sometimes residing in the dolls their daddy would least expect.

He remembers the first time he ever pierced a doll. It was almost an accident, actually. He'd been hammering a large nail into a block of wood thinking it would make a quick, serviceable stand for one of his dolls. But once he had the nail in his fingers and the hammer poised he found he couldn't resist an urge to take one of the naked baby dolls with its plump belly, hold it down, pushing it down so firmly against the tabletop it made a little squeak, and drive the nail through the highest point of the belly.

The nail went in so easily he was actually a bit disappointed. He grabbed the head of the nail firmly with his other hand and moved the shaft in and out of the bloated belly. Peculiarly intriguing was the way the soft plastic seemed to adapt to the presence of the nail. He tried piercing the baby at various points on its body, gauging the variations in resistance and appearance. Then he tried other dolls of differing styles and materials.

Some days he would decorate his walls with an array of such augmented dolls, using nails and knives and skewers

and fishing rods and car antennae and pointed sticks, to arrive at a panorama of vertical terrors worthy of a Breughel or a Vlad Tepes. Sometimes he would remove their limbs before piercing the torsos. The tiny, perfect arms and legs separated from the bodies resembled bits of viscera, and Flint wondered if the manufacturers had ever considered adding such accessories to their product lines.

Eventually he moved on to a variety of alterations: scalp excavations and removals, nose and chin mastication (aided by mayonnaise and a family of rats when the neighbour's dog proved to be uninterested), tears and splits and parts from small appliances glued on, paint and glitter and marker and cloth strips applied with a staple gun. Sometimes he would overstuff the cloth doll heads, the cheeks eventually ripping, the stuffing oozing out randomly.

And even when his activities were at their most frenzied, he thought of his babies and what had been done to them, and tried to imagine what must go through the mind of a person who could do such things to a child. He sacrificed doll after doll in this quest for understanding.

Some weeks he would work himself into a state of nervous exhaustion, the results of his explorations scattered around him like human battle debris. His hands would shake as he surveyed the remains and his vision degraded. Details were lost in his agitation, leaving him with overall impressions of vague landscapes of misery. There was no pleasure in any of this; it wasn't as if he actually enjoyed what he did to the dolls. He had come to view them as projects, experiments he felt compelled to execute. But by the end of a few months of such activity he'd find himself ambushed by unexpected bouts of weeping, and wondering what he would do if anyone ever found out about his secret activities.

What would he have told his daughters if they'd caught him doing things like this to their own dolls? Of course, he wouldn't be doing such things if they were alive. Manipulating the dolls is a kind of meditation: the idea of a child's body, in pieces. His daughters' old dolls are tucked away in their

trunks upstairs, safe as his daughters never were.

Up on his shelves the world gazes out at Flint through hundreds of eyes, in all its bewildering and fragile forms, inviting him in. Once again his children are awake.

Flint takes an almost featureless baby's head from one of the boxes and begins carving its cheeks with a knife. "What should I name this one?" he asks his daughters. They look down at him, stumped. He makes a flower in one cheek, a jagged lightning bolt of a dagger in the other. "Have I ever told you, my sweets, how much I love you, and have loved you?" The kewpie dolls over the door nod in unison.

He rummages through another box and finds a torso. The finish is dull, the belly swirled in layers of crayon, the nipples lost in ragged holes. He pushes head and torso together, securing them with a sharp pencil rammed through one cheek and down into the short stalk of the neck joint.





"Have I ever told you how in the old days children died so frequently, so easily, their names were recycled? In those days your names might have been passed down from some dead sister. So do we call this one Ellen, or Ann?"

His daughters rock violently side to side on their shelf, knocking several other dolls to the floor. Their rapid exhalations sound like small engines in last labour.

"Oh, don't fight it! You have to cultivate acceptance if you're going to make it through a life like this one." After some consideration he attaches large meat forks to the doll's shoulders with rusted screws. For legs he uses a wooden spoon and an apple peeler. The dress he puts on the doll is pink, and soiled, vertical rips down the chest. "I can't remember if this dress was yours, Ellen, or Ann's."

He stares at the doll as it staggers to its feet, manoeuvring its way with a lopsided gait across the workbench top. A piece of hairless plastic falls out of the back of the skull. "My memories of you..." He stops and closes his eyes. "Are as fragile as your bodies were." The doll spins at the edge of the deeply scarred surface, teeters precariously, then heads back toward Flint. Who is crying now, and embarrassed. "Sometimes I can't remember what year it was your mother left, and if it was the fall or late summer when they found what was left of you. I do remember when I was just about your age, and the leaves had turned, and I found this doll under a mass of decay in the woods behind our house, and I was so scared — I was crying then, too — because I thought it was a dead baby I had found, and *how could someone do something like that?*

"Do you think," he cries, searching the assemblage of dolls for his children's faces, but not finding them, distressed that they're hiding from him again, playing with him, "that the first dolls might have been dead children? Your baby sister dies and they give you her corpse to play with? At some point we came from animals, didn't we? God help me. I can see us doing such things!"

The doll stops in the middle of the table, rises on its apple peeler leg, and turns, skips, turns again ballerina-like, gouging the wood, chips flying furiously.

"Quick, girls!" he yells. "Give me a story to tell her. I have to make up stories for her so that she'll think she's alive."

The doll leaps, scissoring its kitchen utensil legs. The tattered dress rips more, then begins to shred from her body. In seconds she is a jumble of edges and torn baby shapes still dancing wildly, pink tatters of cloth flying through the air.

"Now I remember. Ann?" He scans the shelves, but his daughters have wandered off somewhere else to play. "It was your dress, wasn't it? That one was yours." But nothing comes in reply.

The doll shakes its way into his face for a kiss, inviting him to see what he has dreaded, and yearned, to see. How his lovelies, his babies had looked that afternoon the monster had taken them. Ann's startled eyes suddenly open in the pale plastic face. Ellen's tiny arms beat at his head in desperate alarm.

**STEVE RASNIC TEM** has stories forthcoming in *F&SF*, the anthology *White of the Moon* and a collection from Ash-Tree Press.

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A man in a trench coat stands next to a large, dark bottle. The background is a blurred, smoky scene with a window showing a snowy landscape. The title 'A BOTTLEFUL OF SHADOWS' is written in large, bold, serif capital letters. The author's name 'Alexander Glass' is written in a smaller, bold, serif font below the title.

# A BOTTLEFUL OF SHADOWS

Alexander Glass

**THE PHOTOGRAPH HAS GROWN** old, the images blurring, the woman's figure slowly turning into a ghost, trapped against a smoky background.

Thorsson holds the picture carefully, by a creased corner, between a creased finger and thumb. He glances from the smudged lines of the photograph to the sharp lines that have been etched into his skin, the cruel marks of time, and smiles. Shaking his head, he drops the sepia-coloured square back into the shoebox, to rest with the others. Eighty years of memories, and only a few dozen photographs, maybe less. His sister has bought him an album for them, in her usual helpful, well-meaning, interfering way, but he can never bring himself to paste the pictures into it. It seems too neat, too contrived: too much as if he were meant to pretend that his life had been lived according to some nice, orderly strategy. In any case, he likes the way the pictures wander around loose in the box. He imagines that they come to life as soon as he shuts the lid, that they rearrange themselves in the dark, so that when he looks in on them again, they might have shuffled themselves into a different order. Maybe if they did, he thinks, it would somehow change what happened. It is a silly idea, he knows: an old man's dream of correcting his mistakes.

Thorsson places the lid back on the shoebox and sits back, staring through the window at the snow-wrapped fields. The sky is heavy with clouds the colour of steel, scattering their snow; the naked trees push their spindly black bodies up through the carpet of white, and shake and shiver in the wind. There seems to be no colour left in the world. The wreck of the ebony piano, down by the frozen lake, is gradually disappearing from sight beneath a cool, fresh blanket. Watching the swirling flakes of snow, a sour smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, Thorsson finds himself thinking of two women he once knew. Of the first, he has a faded photograph, but of the other he has only a memory. He replaces the shoebox in its drawer, and, glancing down, sees the bottle that has always lain next to it. The bottle is full of black liquid, thick and heavy — Thorsson is not sure exactly what it is. In forty years,

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he has never dared to drink it. He has never even dared to open the bottle.

He'd always thought that memories fade with time, like the pictures in the shoebox; but his own memories are just as sharp and beautifully coloured as if he were still living them. If anything, they are even brighter than before. It is the present that has faded.

**THERE WAS AN ELECTRIC LIGHT, A DISC OF** brilliant white, perched high up on the wall. Beneath it, the paint had cracked and blistered in the constant heat, peeling away like so much dead skin; the black road below was dusted with powder, with chalky flakes of paint. Elsewhere, the paint was immaculate: it was only in the places where the light fell that the paint had come away. Thorsson glanced into the light, watching the tiny motes falling in slow motion to the ground, just like snow, and a sour smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He could taste the paint on the edge of his tongue; he could feel the powder slowly gathering on his lips. Carefully, without making a sound, he stepped aside, out of the light and into the shadow.

He liked this place, this cold, dark, empty corner of Copenhagen. Even though it was a cold night, and there was no one about, and everything here seemed to be made of concrete and steel, he liked it. The concrete was bleached white by the artificial lights; the steel was painted black by the shadows. He had been waiting for an hour, without knowing what he was waiting to see; he was watching a particular window in the apartment building across the square. It was the second window from the left, the third floor up; and, like all the other windows in the building, it was dark. It might almost have been a black square painted on the concrete wall. Thorsson leaned back against the wall of the garage, whose stern lines reminded him of a bunker, and warmed himself with a cigarette, a Ducado, ebony tobacco in a cylinder of gleaming white. He ought to give it up, he knew, but he was already struggling to cut out the drink. Where once there had been a grey steel flask nestling in his inside pocket, now there was nothing but a photograph, his only photograph of Natasha. He knew he would never have found the strength to give up drinking, had it not been for her, and so her picture had taken the place of the flask. Giving up the cigarettes could wait: one thing at a time. The bitter smoke curled up into the light, the motes of ash tumbling upwards, meeting the motes of white dust as they tumbled down.

There was a sudden movement at the window, a flash of pale light within the darkened frame. Thorsson grew tense, staring, the cigarette forgotten in his hand. As quickly as it had appeared, the vision was gone, and he was left wondering if he had imagined it. It had been a human figure, a woman, staring from the window with one palm spread flat against the glass. The contrast of that pale skin against the dark was so stark that Thorsson thought he had seen each line carved into her palm. She had seen him, he was sure. She had been looking down at him; he could almost feel her eyes on him, even now. Frustrated at his carelessness, he bit back a curse and hurried closer to the building.

The entrance was a smooth glass door in a slippery glass wall; inside, Thorsson saw the beginning of a

stairway. The first few steps gleamed in the harsh light that spilled in from the lamps outside, but the rest had been swallowed by the dark that flowed down the stairway from somewhere high above. Beside the stairway was another door, a smooth steel door, a door that was in motion as he approached. It was grinding shut, the dim light inside the metal box reduced to a single white line, as thin as an old man's hair. Then the light was gone, and the box climbed up into the building, away from him. Thorsson cursed again, the oath slipping out this time, wriggling and darting between his teeth, to freeze in the air. Then he felt something pressed against the back of his neck, something like a ring of metal, small and round and cold as ice. He froze, like the curse, and waited.

"You shouldn't use language like that. You never know who might be listening."

It was a whisper: a woman's voice, whispering to him. Shaking away the memory of Natasha, Thorsson tried to turn his head, to look at her, but felt the cold mouth of the revolver biting into his skin, and stopped. It was the woman from the third-floor window. It had to be. She moved a little closer, and Thorsson caught a strange scent, not the rich perfume he had been expecting, but something else. He couldn't identify it; the only thing he could think of was that it smelled like dust.

"Are you carrying a gun?" she asked him, cold, business-like.

Thorsson was about to shake his head, but decided against it. Instead he replied, carefully, "I am unarmed."

"Good."

She released him and stepped away, keeping the revolver pointed at his head. For a moment Thorsson couldn't look at her; he stared into the mouth of the gun, mesmerised, watching the shards of light that slid back and forth along its polished black surface. Then he looked up. The woman was young, maybe ten years younger than him, maybe twenty; it was hard to tell. It was hard to be sure of anything in this light. She was blonde, but Thorsson couldn't tell the exact shade; nor could he tell the colour of her eyes. She was wrapped in a dark coat, which accentuated the pallor of her skin; here, bathed in a cold electric glow, she looked as if her body had been drained of blood. Thorsson dropped his cigarette to the ground; it rolled away, leaving a trail of smooth, pale ashes and dark shreds of tobacco.

"Who sent you?" she demanded.

Thorsson shrugged. "He called himself Silk. No first name. Just Mr Silk. Maybe it was his real name, maybe not. He was bald, completely bald, and very pale." Silk's face was not an easy one to forget. He had sat behind a steel desk, upon which had been sitting a bottle filled with some dark fluid. Thorsson had assumed it was black rum. "Now that I think about it, he looked a little like Nosferatu." He realised he was babbling, and quickly shut his mouth.

"Where did he find you? Here in Denmark?"

Thorsson shook his head. "London. He didn't say who you were. He didn't say anything about you. He just gave me this address, and told me to call him if anything happened, anything at all."

"Well, something's happened now."

"It has."



The woman lowered the revolver a little, and tipped her head to one side, as if to examine Thorsson from a different angle. "How much is he paying you?" She grimaced, and shook her head. "No, don't tell me. It wouldn't mean anything to me. It must have been a lot, though, to send you across Europe, running errands for someone you don't know."

"He paid me very well. He was going to pay me a lot more when I reported back to him. Now it looks as if he might get to keep that money."

The woman smiled, and shook her head. "I'm not going to shoot you. I don't care about you. I just want the photographs. I imagine Mr Silk wants them too."

"What photographs?"

"Where are you going to meet Silk?" she asked, ignoring his question. "It'll be somewhere here, in Copenhagen. He won't have the patience to wait around in England."

Thorsson frowned. "At the harbour, tomorrow. He owns a warehouse there. Or rents one, I'm not sure which."

"Fine. You go and tell him what you've seen. And give him my regards, if you like."

"Whose regards?" Thorsson asked, knowing she would only tell him if she wanted to.

"You can call me Ida. Ida Weiss. Your friend Mr Silk will know who I am."

The wail of a siren reached them from somewhere nearby. The woman, Ida Weiss, nodded, as if she had been expecting it.

"I called the police," she told him, simply. Thorsson raised an eyebrow.

"In case you hadn't noticed, Miss Weiss, you're the one holding the gun."

The woman nodded, but made no move to put the weapon away. Her gaze slid past him — he still couldn't see the colour of her eyes — and Thorsson turned, to see a patrol car crawling towards them, between the grim shapes of the bunkers. It growled as it came, its voice low and dangerous. There were two officers inside, silhouetted against a smoky light: the car's exhaust fumes lingered in the cold air, their sickly-sweet stench filling the little square, an eerie, bone-white glare slicing through the smoke. The siren had been switched off, and all Thorsson could hear was the faint murmur of the engine and the soft growl of the wheels on the black road. A bright blue light was rotating on top of the car, sending shadows spinning across the walls. Thorsson looked back to where Ida Weiss had been standing, but she was gone. It was as if she had vanished, stepped into nowhere.

One day later he found himself waiting again, at the harbour this time, in the midst of a rolling fog. The police had questioned him, and then let him go — after all, he'd done nothing wrong, and they couldn't find the person who had called them. Ida Weiss wasn't in her apartment. In fact, Thorsson discovered from eavesdropping on the two officers, she didn't officially live there. No one lived there at all.

The woman hadn't asked his name. She had told him hers, though Thorsson doubted that the name was real, but she hadn't wanted to know his. So, he reasoned, either she already knew about him — maybe she had even been

tipped off that Silk was paying someone to spy on her — or she really didn't care who he was. Neither alternative seemed quite right. Thorsson paced back and forth, frowning. He couldn't think: he had slept badly, woken over and over again by dreams of a woman with red hair: Natasha. The dreams had been full of vivid colours: the sky-blue walls of the rehab clinic where she had worked, the grey faces of the addicts; the green of the top she had worn, the thousand golden shades of the falling leaves; the yellow and purple of bruises, the stark red of blood. He had awoken with the taste of blood in his mouth, and for a moment he had thought it was her blood. His head ached; something seemed to be pounding at it from within. His mind was clouded, as if the fog had found a way in. All this secrecy made him nervous. It was his job: he was paid to be a shadow, and to hide in shadow. Even so, something felt wrong. If he wasn't being paid so well, he'd have told Silk to get lost.

There was Silk, standing in the shadow of one of the huge warehouse gates. Thorsson wondered how long he'd been there; in the mist, it would be easy to miss someone standing right beside you. Silk was wearing the same outfit he had worn when they had last met: a smart black suit, white shirt, black bow tie — like a conjurer, or a gambler, or a nightclub pianist. He looked out of place in the suit, somehow. Perhaps it was the black and white, the sharp, almost shocking contrast between the two. Thorsson imagined that nothing was black and white to a man like Silk; he lived in grey areas, in places between places. Seeing Thorsson, Silk ran a spindly hand over his round, white head, and smiled a cold smile.

"There you are," he said softly. "Did you do as I asked?"

"Yes," Thorsson replied, heavily. Then he said: "Who is she?"

Silk spread his palms in the air, sweeping handfuls of mist aside. "Someone who wants what I want," he said, simply, as if that explained everything.

"A set of photographs."

The other man gave a curt nod. "So she told you."

"That's all she told me — that, and her name. What are the photographs?"

Silk looked away, into the mist. "Do you really need to know, Mr Thorsson? You're being paid a tidy sum. You could simply take the money and return home, and our arrangement would be at an end. You would never know who the truth about me; I would never know the truth about you."

"You know my real name, Mr Silk," Thorsson pointed out.

The other man shrugged. "I have only your word for that."

"I have nothing to hide."

"No?" Silk stared at him. A tendril of fog snaked between them, then faded away to nothing. "Everyone has something to hide, Thorsson. Everyone. Even you."

"What about you?" Thorsson demanded, feeling his skin begin to grow hot. "What are you hiding? Are you a gangster? Are you a spy? What are you?"

"A spy? That was your business, not mine — when spies were still needed. I am a supplier, Thorsson. Nothing



more than that. I supply people with things they want. What nobler profession could there be?"

Thorsson thought he understood the euphemism. "You supply drugs."

Silk pursed his bloodless lips. His shoulders lifted, very slightly. It might have been a shrug. "Things people want. What do you want, Thorsson?"

Thorsson closed his eyes, until the image of Natasha, which had risen, unwanted, from his memory, had disappeared. "Nothing. Just give me my money."

"As you wish." Silk drew two envelopes from his pocket, one black, the other white. The white envelope contained Thorsson's money, all in cash of course, used notes; and Silk handed it over without hesitation. The other envelope must have contained whatever it was that Silk supplied. He handled it very gingerly, making sure it didn't tear or even crease. He turned it over in his long, skinny hands, handling it as gently as if it were a baby, or a bomb.

"There's nothing wrong with giving people what they want, my friend," he murmured. "That's how the world works. This little envelope will let a few people escape for a while. They'll relax, lie back and watch new colours, colours they've never seen. Did you ever see the Aurora Borealis? This is better than the Northern Lights, Thorsson. Much better. Then they'll pick themselves up and go on living."

Before Silk could slip the envelope back into his pocket, Thorsson snatched it from his hand, and ran into the fog. He ran along Hans Christian Andersen Boulevard, to Town Hall Square, then darted into a side-street and doubled back towards Vesterbro. The fog had crept in everywhere, along every street, drifting into shadowy corners, tapping at doors and windows, trying to get in. Thorsson tore through the mist, breaking it as he went, leaving it to close behind him as he passed. He didn't stop running until he reached the hotel. He hadn't told Silk where he was staying. It was a small place, close to Enghave Station, and Thorsson thought he would be safe there, for the night at least. Tomorrow he could take a train out of the city. London was too obvious a place to go; maybe he would go to Berlin or Vienna, maybe Egypt or Morocco, maybe somewhere else, somewhere new. With Silk's money in his pocket, he could go almost anywhere.

Safe in his little room, he examined the envelope. It seemed perfectly ordinary. He held it up to his nose, and breathed in; he had no idea what was inside, and no idea what he was looking for, but the smell of the envelope sent a shiver running through him. Below the good scent of the paper was another smell, a smell he couldn't identify but which was nonetheless familiar. It was something like dust: the same odd smell he had sensed on Ida Weiss. Maybe she was an addict; that would explain her pallor. But Silk seemed just as pale as she — maybe he was an addict himself, and fed his own habit by dealing. Thorsson wondered what the photographs might be. Incriminating evidence, perhaps, something the woman could use to blackmail Silk. That would explain why Silk wanted her watched: he knew the pictures existed, but didn't know where they were. As soon as Weiss had them in her hands, he would send someone to take them from her, probably by force. Thorsson shrugged, and planted a cigarette be-

tween his lips. It was none of his business. He felt sorry for Ida Weiss, but decided she was probably not a saint herself. He had to think of his own safety.

Gingerly, not knowing what he would find inside, he tore open the envelope. A plastic packet fell into his palm, and for a moment he thought he knew what it contained; but then he frowned, and looked closer. It was not powder inside the packet, but something else, something entirely different: something flat and smooth. It was a bundle of photographs — these must be the photographs Ida Weiss had wanted. He shook them from the packet, again not knowing quite what he expected to see; and again he was surprised, and more confused than before.

The photographs were solid squares of colour. There were thirty-six in all: various shades of blue, red, yellow, green. Every colour was there, except black and white — which were not really colours, he had been told. It made no sense. He held a few of the pictures up to the light, trying to see if the glow reflected on the surface would illuminate some kind of hidden image, but there was nothing to be seen. These were not pictures to be used for blackmail. Thorsson could think of no use for them at all. He tucked the pictures away in his pocket — the tips of his fingers brushed against the photo of Natasha, and he shivered — switched the light off, and lay back on the bed, trying to make sense of what was happening.

After a time he thought he sensed a movement in the gloom, as if the darkness in the corners of the room was flowing, in a slow and silent wave, across the floor. Something else was there, something that seemed to have coalesced out of the dark, taken shape out of nothing. Thorsson lay frozen on the bed, too terrified to move. In the back of his mind, the thought arose that perhaps this was an effect of the drug: that it must be the chemicals on the photographs that Silk supplied to his customers; that Thorsson had, inadvertently, absorbed some of the stuff through his skin. He thought he could still sense the odd smell of the powder in the air. He could almost taste it.

Then he heard a sound, a familiar sound which he could not at first identify. Then he recognised it: it was the soft scratch of a match being struck. In the instant that he recognised the sound, Thorsson saw a flame blossom into life in the corner of the room, a tiny, wavering flame. The shadows fled from it, to hide where they could; and in the tiny glow Thorsson saw a face, a human face, with the match held up to a cigarette. It was Ida Weiss.

A slow shock swept over him as he noticed something odd, something wrong, about her — and, he realised, about Silk too. There was no colour in her face. He had noticed that she was pale, but hadn't realised how pale. Her skin was almost white; the eyes and lips were grey. Like a vampire, he thought. Her hair, which he had thought was blonde, was also grey. The lack of colour, on that young face, was dreadful; but worse than that was the lack of colour in the flame. It was white, Thorsson realised, not yellow; its centre, which should have been dark orange, was simply a darker shade of white. The glowing end of the cigarette, too, was a tiny disk of white light, scattered with black strands of tobacco.

"What are you?" he whispered.



Ida Weiss smiled, amused by the question. She shook the flame from her match, unhurried, and came closer, pulling up a chair and sitting neatly beside the bed. Thorsson reached for the light, but she stopped him with a warning look.

"I am who I said I was."

Thorsson shook his head. "You and Silk. You're the same."

She scowled at that, and then shrugged, as if it were of no consequence. "The photographs. You took them from Silk. I need them."

"What are they for?"

"Can't you guess?" She reached into a pocket, and drew out a bottle. It was the same type — perhaps the same bottle, though Thorsson guessed it was not — as the one that Silk had kept on his desk. Thorsson knew, now, that it couldn't be black rum. "If you won't give them to me, perhaps you'll trade."

Thorsson nodded slowly, and fumbled for the smooth black envelope that held the photographs. The woman growl tense as she saw it: she froze, her eyes fixed on the envelope. He slipped his hand inside, as if to draw the pictures out.

"Don't," she whispered.

"Why not?"

"Please don't. Just give them to me, inside the envelope." She was afraid of something — not of Silk, but of the photographs themselves. They terrified her, and yet she had to have them. Thorsson could see it in her face. She wanted to take the photographs and be gone, as soon as she could. "I found you," she said evenly. "Silk can find you too. Why did you choose a place by the station? Don't you drive?"

"No." He folded his arms. "Not any more."

She frowned. "Silk will kill to get the pictures back. He's paid too much for them already; he can't afford to lose them now."

"Don't you want to see them?"

Her colourless eyes grew cold, and an instant later Thorsson found himself staring down the barrel of a gun once more.

"Give me the envelope," she demanded.

"All right." Thorsson held it out to her, and she plucked it from between his fingers. She held it carefully, as Silk had done — as if it were a bomb about to go off. The cigarette trembled between her pale lips, sending specks of ash tumbling down through the gloom.

"Thank you," she said, with a sardonic half-smile. Then she saw the extra photo, the picture of Natasha. Thorsson had accidentally handed it to her, along with the envelope. "Who is she?"

Thorsson closed his eyes tight, and held out his hand for the photo. He felt another curse rise into his mouth, and bit it back down. "No one. No one in particular. Just someone I used to know."

"I'm sorry," she told him. She couldn't have known what he was saying, but maybe she understood what he meant. A moment later he felt the picture fall into his hand. "It's a good thing for me that it's a black and white picture."

"The colour pictures are dangerous to you, aren't they? To your...to your kind." Whatever that meant.

"Yes." She looked away. "You can't imagine it. If you've never seen colour before, you can't imagine what it is. Once you've seen it, you can't describe it. But you want to see it again, and again. You have to see it."

"Addiction can't be good for you," Thorsson told her, trying to keep the bitterness from his voice. "I promise you that."

"I know. I could die. A small dose, here, will send me back into the shadows. It hurts." She stared at him. "I knew Silk had sent you. That's why I called the police. It gave me time to find out how much you knew. Then, when the patrol car arrived, and the blue light fell on to me, I was sent back. Not the easiest of escape routes. A larger dose could destroy my body altogether."

"There are worse things," Thorsson told her, seriously.

Ida Weiss shrugged, suddenly unable to look at him. She got up and walked away, towards the door.

"Keep the bottle, Thorsson."

"No. You'll need it. To get back."

"Yes." She smiled, sadly. "But there are other ways back, and I don't want Silk to follow me. You keep it. Maybe you can come and find me."

Thorsson shook his head. "I don't think so."

He watched her open the door, letting in a slice of white light from the hallway outside. She stepped into the light, and was gone. Thorsson ran to the door and stared out, knowing what he would see: there was no one there. Above, an old yellow light flickered, making the shadows tremble.

#### **THORSSON WONDERS WHY HIS VISION IS BLURRED;**

then he realises his eyes are watering. He shakes his head, laughing bitterly at himself. Then he replaces the bottle in the drawer, next to the shoebox full of memories.

He stares at his palm, at the deepening lines there. His skin seems to be turning grey with age. Everything seems to be turning grey.

He stares out of the window for a while. He finds it hard to believe that spring will come again, that in a few weeks there will be new green shoots pushing their way out of the dead ground, that the trees will begin to bud again, that the birds will return from wherever they have gone. The old piano will show itself again, lying there on the shore like a stranded ship. He can no longer remember the colours. The only colours he can see clearly are the ones he associates with Natasha: the sky-blue walls of the rehab clinic where she had worked, the grey faces of the addicts; the green of the top she had worn, the thousand golden shades of the falling leaves; the yellow and purple of bruises, the stark red of blood.

He had seen her for an instant, in front of the car, through a veil of alcohol. Then she had been gone.

When they dragged him from the driver's seat, the road had been flooded with colours. It had hurt him to see them, and yet he couldn't stop looking. Suddenly, the haze was gone; and everything he saw then, he saw with perfect clarity. The moment is still with him, always; he thinks it will never leave him.

Sometimes, he thinks of Ida Weiss, and wonders what happened to her. More often, he thinks of Natasha; perhaps because he loved her, perhaps only because those memories are the more vivid, and the colours are brighter.

Each time he opens the shoebox, he hopes the photos will have rearranged themselves into a different order; but every time, the order is the same. ■





by Gary  
Couzens

# THE INTERVIEW

## AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

**O**n August 19th 1987, Christopher Priest drove through Hungerford, Berkshire. That same day in that same town, Michael Ryan shot sixteen people before killing himself. This traumatic event was the inspiration for *The Extremes*, which begins in the aftermath of a similar — though fictional — tragedy, in the small English town of Bulverton-on-Sea. FBI agent Teresa Simons, born in Britain, comes to Bulverton in the hope of making sense of her husband's death at the hands of a gunman in Texas the previous year. On the same day as the Bulverton killings... Of course, being a Christopher Priest novel, it's not as straightforward as that. Virtual reality, or Extreme Experience (ExEx), is now commercially available. All manner of computer-programmed experience is available for hire: from pornography to recreations of the violent events of the past. (Also in town are American executives from a software company, hoping to use people's memories in order to make a virtual version of the Bulverton killings commercially available.) On the day of the massacre, the Bulverton killer, Gerry Grove, paid a visit to the local ExEx facility...

'I started thinking about an idea for a novel,' Chris explained, 'based broadly on the Hungerford massacre and its aftermath. I hadn't got very far with it. Around this time I was in touch with a man called Colin Ludlow, a drama producer at BBC TV, and he asked me if I had any ideas for a possible serial. The only thing I had in mind was the totally vague notion that "the Hungerford massacre and its aftermath" might make a story. Colin and I talked about it a few times, and this eventually forced a notion for a story to emerge. The idea of the TV story was that "spree" or "outburst" killers might have genetic typing, and that it would therefore be theoretically possible to trace such people and ultimately discover what their motives were. The title became *The Cull*, and it was commissioned as a three-part serial, a psychological thriller. I wrote the first episode, which was accepted, but then everything went quiet. (A familiar experience for people who write for the BBC, apparently.) After a period of time it was clear nothing more was going to be done, and the rights reverted. Some time later, in need of selling a new novel, I gave the TV material to Martin Fletcher, my editor at Simon & Schuster, and asked him if he thought a novel might be developed from it. He said yes and we signed a contract.

'Two things then happened. The first was that I perversely lost all interest in the idea of *The Cull*, and went back to the disorganized mental rambling that I'd been doing before the BBC were interested. The second was the massacre at Dunblane. I was hit hard by that: my children were the same age as the ones killed on that day, and attended a remarkably similar kind of school. I found the whole idea of writing a novel that would ultimately take an interest in people like Michael Ryan or Thomas Hamilton abhorrent. However, by this time I was under contract to produce a novel and like it or not I had to get on with it. With this kind of pressure I found that the only way I could deal with that material was to approach it at an oblique angle...in effect, through the virtual reality aspect of the story. This would have come into *The Cull*, but only incidentally. After a painful period, I "found" the novel I wanted to write, and it became *The Extremes*. There's a certain small overlap between the two stories: the central character has the same name and family background, the post-massacre state of the town is the same, but that's about it. I felt obliged to try to follow the TV script (because that was after all the basis on which Martin Fletcher had commissioned the novel), but after a few abortive attempts to be true to it I gave up and never even looked at it again.'

As Teresa becomes more and more involved in her ExEx scenarios (amongst others, recreations of spree-killings of the past), she encounters opposition



from the American executives, who would rather the Bulverton survivors' memories they incorporate into their software be clean, and not confused by an outsider asking questions. But that's easier said than done, as memory is fallible; during the course of the novel reality and fantasy become inextricably combined. This is a favourite Priestian theme, recalling *The Affirmation* and especially *A Dream of Wessex*, which involves another consensus other-reality which becomes a reality of its own — and, like that novel, *The Extremes* implies that if fantasy can be made from reality, then the reverse is also possible.

'Perception of memory, and understanding it, is probably the central theme in most of my novels. The books elaborate it, of course, but my own interest in memory, the starting-point, is a fairly straightforward one, perhaps a commonplace one. Do I remember accurately? If I do, why is it that so often what I think I remember is at odds with what I can research objectively as factual truth (or which other people remember differently)? If I don't remember accurately, what's going on instead...and is it more interesting than mere memory? An example that has fascinated me for years: I have a distinct and shocking memory of seeing a German flying bomb going over during WW2. I can still see it now: a small silver shape crossing a blue sky, and my mother yelling at me to do something (presumably to take cover, or lie down, or something like that). I was born in mid-1943, and the V1s were used against Britain from early June 1944 until about March 1945. It's just possible that I was old enough to remember seeing one. Except...no one in my family remembers anything like this, and anyway I was growing up in the suburbs of Manchester, and as far as I can find out the V1s did not penetrate as far north as that. This kind of thing opens up fascinating areas for a writer: false memory syndrome, the fugue state, cryptamnesia, the state of dreaming, amnesia, neurasthenia, psychodrama, archetypes, myths, collective unconscious. As far as I'm concerned this is a rich lode of ideas which can be mined almost indefinitely. When you then additionally think of what is going on now: genetic engineering, DNA typing, developments with artificial intelligence and memory storage, and never mind the Internet, virtual reality, drug-induced traumas, brainwashing techniques, subliminals... It's a great time to be alive and writing novels.

'One of the things I'm having to come to terms with at present is the way the physical fabric of the area where I grew up as a child is being reshaped. The whole area (southern suburbs of Manchester) is being developed like crazy, with new bypasses and motorways everywhere, town centres being completely rebuilt, shopping malls going up, buildings being torn down, the airport extension flattening miles of countryside where I used to spend a lot of time. I find it almost impossible to find my way around now, and have to use maps all the time. If I'd lived there all my life there would be no problem, of course, but I left the place in the late 1950s, did not return at all for nearly twenty years, and since then have visited only infrequently. Much of it now looks like parts of Dallas to me. But at the same time there are little pockets which seem completely unaltered.'

Christopher Priest's career to date falls naturally into two phases: more straightforward sf (*Indoctrinaire*, *Fugue for a Darkening Island*, *Inverted World*). The HG Wells homage/pastiche *The Space Machine* is a transitional work, as is *A Dream of Wessex*. The difference between these and his later novels (*The Affirmation*, *The Glamour*, *The Quiet Woman*, *The Prestige* and *The Extremes*) is that in the later novels, the alterations of perception and the creation of other realities is on an individual level rather than a communal one, as in *Inverted World* and *A Dream of Wessex*.

'I'm not one of those people who feels he has a career: I make things up as I go along. But when you look back I suppose you can see the sort of patterns you describe. The real shape comes, of course, from the life of the writer. I see all my old books in a personal way: they make me remember where I was, what I was doing, at the time I wrote them. To everyone else they're just books, but for me they all represent stages in growing up and learning how to write novels. I certainly see *Wessex* as a transitional book: it's a valediction to a certain kind of social science fiction. It also is the thing it describes. But another transition happened before that. I wrote my first two novels, *Indoctrinaire* and *Fugue* thinking of them

**'I found the whole idea of writing a novel that would ultimately take an interest in people like Michael Ryan or Thomas Hamilton abhorrent.'**

**'The point about writing imaginative or speculative fiction is that it should be on the edge of something, always prepared to shock or outrage or confound.'**



## THE EXTREMES

Christopher Priest

Simon &amp; Schuster hardback, £16.99

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British born Teresa Simons returns to England in the hope of coming to terms with her grief. Her husband, an FBI agent, was recently killed by an out-of-control gunman while on assignment in a small Texas town. She is drawn to the small town of Bulverton on the south coast, sensing that in this run-down resort she may find some new understanding. For on the same hot day last June, Bulverton too suffered the horror of a gunman's spree – a massacre with haunting similarities to the murders in Texas.

Failing to find any explanation of the mystery, Teresa turns to the virtual reality world of Extreme Experience. The best and worst of human experience can be found in virtual reality. Seeking the best, Teresa has to confront the worst. In the extremes of violence she finds that the past and the present may combine, and her own future may be glimpsed...

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as science fiction, believing myself to be an sf writer. Things changed soon after I finished *Fugue*. I began to feel dissatisfied with sf: it was going through a "boom" phase, with all sorts of half-cocked rubbish doing well and academic critics making extravagant claims for it. Meanwhile, my private life changed dramatically. Many of the friends I had then were nothing to do with the sf or literary world, and I was reading much more broadly. I was getting involved in various things I hadn't tried before, like film-making. *Inverted World* came out of this period: it was the first book I tried to write from "general principles", and yet it is by miles my most generic sf book. I found that dead puzzling! Still do. I suppose what it might mean is that these things take time to emerge, and anyway nothing is planned. But they're all transitions, really. I know what you mean about *The Affirmation*, but it was a way of pushing against a door to see what was on the other side. Got there, went through, left the door open a chink or two just in case, moved on.'

Although the novels of Priest's 'second phase' use sf/fantasy devices (parallel worlds, invisibility, near-future dystopia, matter transportation and virtual reality, respectively) they do so in a different way to genre sf. They are published (deliberately on Priest's part) as 'fiction' rather than with a genre label, making them slipstream novels before the term was invented: genre themes and devices employed in a 'mainstream'-novel way, as metaphors and devices for telling ultimately human stories. As Chris explained, 'I've nothing against sf "devices" as such; what I'm critical of is the way they've been used by sf writers over the years. Too much sf lacks a metaphorical life, and so you end up with what amounts to a literature that deals with imaginary gadgets and half-baked social experiments. But if you put some metaphors behind the ideas everything changes. I don't see *The Glamour* as one of my best novels, but it's a case in point. It seemed to me that no one (including Wells) had ever written about invisibility in a metaphorical way, that it had only ever been a gadget or gimmick. Interestingly (to me, if no one else), two American novels that were also about invisibility appeared about a year after *The Glamour*. One was by Thomas Berger [*Being Invisible*], the other by HF Saint [*Memoirs of an Invisible Man*]. Both of these were gadget novels: invisibility as a way of getting into women's locker rooms, of spying on your neighbours making love, of hiding from your enemies, and so on. (Their books were both bestsellers and one was filmed; there's a moral in this!)

Future Priest projects include the collection *The Dream Archipelago*, comprising three stories previously collected in *An Infinite Summer* ('Whores', 'The Negation', 'The Watched') plus 'The Miraculous Cairn' and 'The Cremation', all revised with new linking material. Along with that publication, in Spring 1999, will be the reissue by Earthlight of *A Dream of Wessex*, *The Space Machine*, *Inverted World* and, back in print after two decades, *Fugue for a Darkening Island*. 'The reissue of *Fugue* is not a particularly important reversal of policy. Yes, I was keeping it out of print, but at the same time it wasn't as if anyone was trying to get me to change my mind. I haven't read it since the early 1970s, but it was reissued twenty years ago by Pan. At that time, someone wrote a hostile review of it and described it as a racist and inflammatory book. I knew that wasn't so, but it made me think that the world had probably changed a great deal since the time I wrote it. I decided it was probably best to let it stay out of sight. But Earthlight wanted four books from me; *The Quiet Woman* isn't available, so it left a choice between *Fugue* and *Indoctrinaire*. I think *Indoctrinaire* is really pretty amateurish, so *Fugue* it was. But since this has been announced, two or three people have said *Fugue* isn't as terrible as perhaps I had been made to think. So OK.'

Christopher Priest has made clear his unease with much of what passes for written sf these days, so I concluded the interview by wondering what he thought of small press and independent publications. 'I'm all for them. The point about writing imaginative or speculative fiction is that it should be on the edge of something, always prepared to shock or outrage or confound. There should be an agenda behind the writing, even if it upsets people. There should be factions and schisms and unpopular opinions and a good sprinkling of rudeness. Receiving a good fiction magazine through the post should be like getting a kick up the bum every now and then. The small presses are the only hope for this, but these days I keep worrying if I'm one of the pricks everyone wants to kick against...'



## letters

from **Jeff VanderMeer, Florida, USA**

I read Gary Couzens's informative and well written article on Nicolas Roeg with great interest. I agree with most of his assessments. But I disagree that Roeg's talent is 'finite, and it can and does grow cold'. I've seen four of his later films – *Cold Heaven*, *Two Deaths*, *Heart of Darkness* and *Full Body Massage*. In my opinion *Cold Heaven*, although not the match of *Don't Look Now* or *Walkabout*, is an interesting exploration of Roeg's recurring themes of love, relationships and spirituality, and in no way a disappointment or embarrassment. That it went straight to video in the UK is due only to, as Couzens succinctly puts it, that 'commercial cinema is much less welcoming to the stylistic adventurousness' that Roeg's films display. *Heart of Darkness*, meanwhile, is simply a case of the wrong director coupled with the wrong producer – the film was made for Ted Turner's TNT network, for a series which routinely rips the heart, liver and kidneys out of whatever classic they serve up. There was probably nothing Roeg could have done to make that film work, given the situation, and he probably should never have agreed to direct it. But if anyone wants proof that Roeg can still direct exceptional movies, I recommend *Two Deaths* and *Full Body Massage*, both of which are excellent, skilfully-edited films. *Full Body Massage* stars Mimi Rogers in perhaps her best performance (lest you think Rogers incapable of an excellent performance, all I can say is see this movie). Any film with this amount of nudity which can still leave you *thinking* at the end deserves special recognition. *Two Deaths*, meanwhile, is a devastating look at love and obsession set against a landscape of political upheaval, with stand-out performances by Sonia Braga and Michael Gabon. In both films, Roeg proves he still has a lot of life left in him – and a lot of good movies. For a man of 70 years, that's saying something...

In closing, I should also add that Roeg, more than almost any other director, has attempted to create 'literature' on the screen. More than any other director, he has come closer to reproducing on film the stream-of-consciousness technique perfected by James Joyce, and he has proven less tied to linear storytelling than most other directors. For this, I, as a writer am extremely grateful, and I recommend that any writer who wishes to experiment with narrative and technique should see Roeg's films. There is something about seeing such non-

linear storytelling in a film which, I think, has a profoundly different effect on a writer than reading it in print. It is a totally different perspective on those problems and solutions usually specific to literature, to writing.

from **Colin Greenland, Cambridge**

Fascinating article on Nic Roeg by Gary Couzens – if only it went a bit further! Is *Cold Heaven* from the amazing Brian Moore novel? Is *Hotel Paradise* from the bizarre Eric McCormack anti-novel? Is it possible to get the screenplay for *Performance* anywhere?

[Gary Couzens replies: yes, *Cold Heaven* is based on the Brian Moore novel. Films based on his work are a diverse bunch: The Luck of Ginger Coffey, The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne, Catholics (for TV), The Temptation of Eileen Hughes (TV) and Black Robe. He's also credited with the screenplay for Hitchcock's Torn Curtain. According to the Internet Movie Database *Hotel Paradise* is an original screenplay. I've searched for the *Performance* screenplay but couldn't find it, although there will be a BFI Classics book by Colin McCabe out very soon.]

from **Des Knight, Beckenham, Kent**

I particularly enjoyed the slipstream cinema article about Jean Cocteau. I recently saw *The Blood of a Poet* as part of a triple bill with Dali/Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* and Borowczyk's *Les Astronautes* at London's South Bank Centre. I didn't think I would enjoy *The Blood of a Poet*, no doubt due to Cocteau's 'art poseur' reputation, but instead I found myself captivated by its dream-like quality. I liked the way Cocteau undercut the action by inserting his sarcastic comments, deflating the film's pretentiousness at every turn. I was also delighted to see the very beautiful Lee Miller (in the role of The Muse), a talented artist in her own right.

Obviously a definitive list of slipstream directors is very subjective (my own would include Ed Wood, Stanley Kubrick, Alejandro Jodorowsky etc) so I'll be interested to see who you feature in future issues.

from **Sarah Crabtree, Reading, Berks**

I particularly enjoyed the interview with Jonathan Coe and his comments on the New-Laddism. It's nice to see a man quoted as saying that 'the old stereotypical gender roles...have become so redundant by now that it's absurd really'. Only a few issues ago there seemed to be a contention between women and sci-fi and men and romance. Have things really moved on that quickly?

from **John Francis Haines, Warrington**

Impossible to pick a best story from TTA16 – all were very well written, hey, they all had a beginning, middle and end, yet they were all very, very disturbing. Some terrific ideas and images – all the writers managed to pack an enormous amount into the short spaces they had chosen. Just shows it is possible to be both traditional and modern at the same time, and that it's not essential to subject the reader to incomprehensible obscurity in order to show how 'cutting edge' you are – all these stories were cutting edge, all different, and all good.

from **Colin Brush, London**

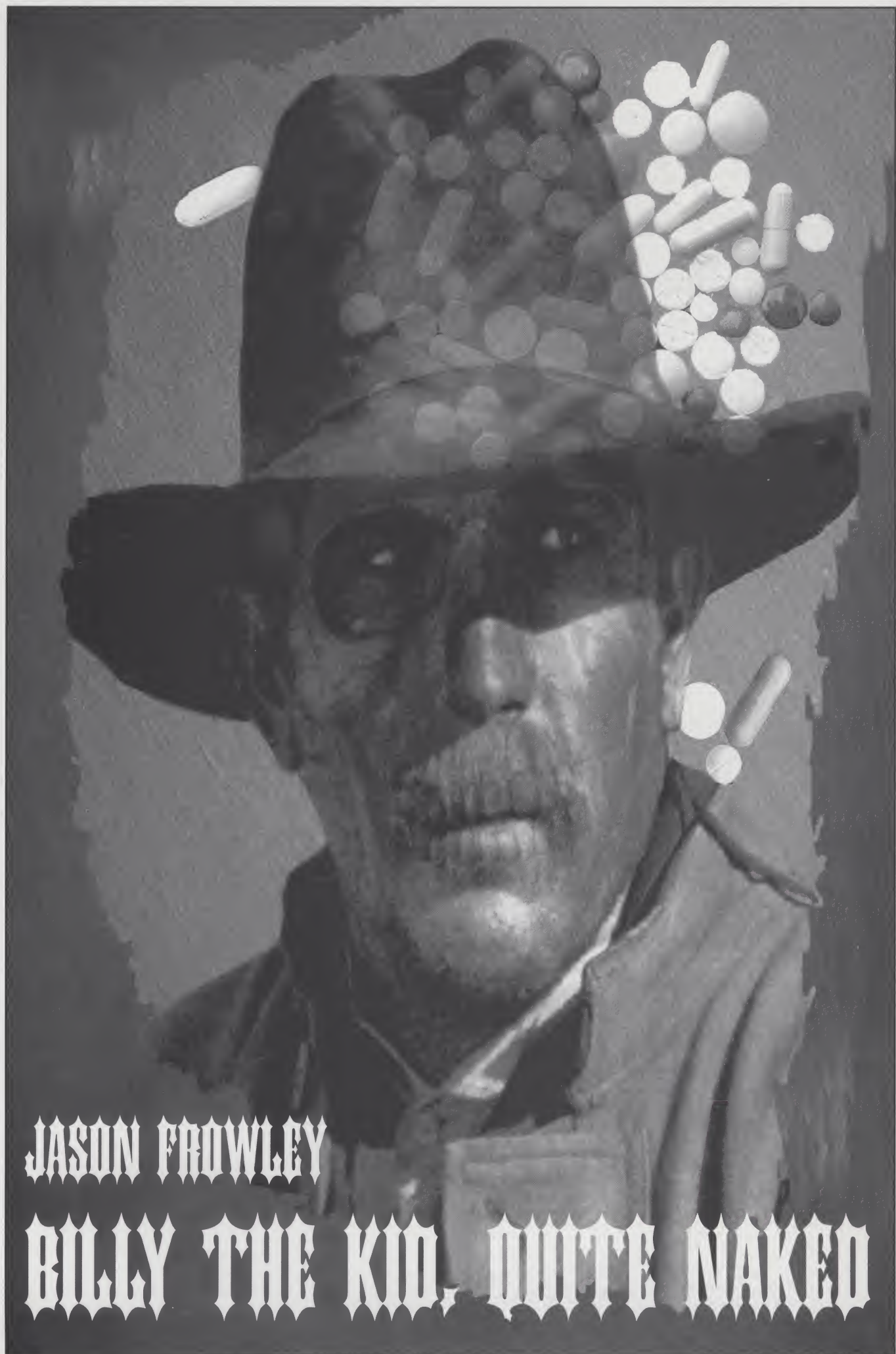
I found myself somewhat unsettled to read Rick Cadger's comments on the superabundance of information and 'shocking images' awash in today's media. He states that 'happily, after the initial shock wore off, I have been able to look at each example in a calmer light', swiftly following this torpid statement with 'none of this information... is ultimately harmful in itself'. Surely neither statement is an expression one would expect from an unquiet soul? More worryingly, he seems an advocate of the argument 'familiarity breeds contempt' – too true – because 'its power to shock and corrupt will become dissipated' and so 'a certain neutralising effect takes place'. Perhaps it did not occur to him to wonder why our capacity to feel shock and revulsion is part of what makes us human and that by glibly letting ourselves become desensitised we are committing a crime more pernicious than any amount of hate peddled on the Net.

He is particularly wrong to embrace the Net's all-seeing-all-knowing eye in one sense. The glut of information he welcomes (with its inherent 'neutralising' powers) attacks us in that place we should hold most dear: our passionate imaginations. Passion never came out of neutrality and removing the requirement to conjure in your mind's eye what is merely implied is a poverty of the imagination your magazine should be attacking, not defending.

from **Frank Swannack, Preston, Lancs**

The Unquiet Soul reads more like The Totally Pissed Off Soul, though Rick's honesty is exhilarating. Still, I can't help worrying that if his lifestyle continues as described he could soon be writing the column from a secure unit.





JASON FROWLEY

BILLY THE KID. QUOTE NAKED



**AMONGST THE MANY THINGS SHE HAD TAKEN WAS**

a good half of his virility. Naturally she had never intended to take it, and naturally she had not taken it all. Billy remained functional, more or less — functional enough anyway for any half-drunken girl chanced upon in a pub or club and steered back to the flat — but his body no longer supplicated itself to the act as it used to. She had taken away the heat and the blood and the edge of the desire and left him only the memory of those crazy lusts of other times when mind and body had seemed shrunk to the dimensions of a single iron pipe electrified and pulsing in grease; when the whole world had seemed a puppet to bounce upon the head of his erection. Left him this memory then, and left him searching for an explanation. And the explanation he settled upon was this: he had given so much of himself to her that there was nothing left to give to anyone else. It went against his English nature to reveal himself so completely, and his nature was fighting back. As if his body were in actual rebellion against him, as if it were telling him that he could be close to no one else if he insisted on being so close to her. Yet he'd thought of her only as a friend. Her name was Emily and he had told her more than he had ever known he had to tell, had told and told until it seemed dangerous to tell any more. But he told anyway, told far too much, and he shed his skin like a snake when he told her the final thing.

Why it had happened he could not have said. Certainly it was not loneliness. Had you asked him, he would have told you that in this fourth decade of life he had quite enough friends and did not need any more. He had simply taken an opportunity. He had noticed her from the window of the bus as it pulled up in front of the railway station, and she, glancing across, had noticed him too. In that very instant he had felt it: the vertiginous sensation that comes when you know you are sharing identical thoughts with a stranger. Gentled by his lunchtime smoke he did not look away but smiled faintly. She ducked her head and vanished amongst the arches around the door and he did not expect to see her again...but when he came away from the counter with cappuccino slopping into the saucer there she was, just two tables away, casting her eyes across a newspaper and fingering her hair as nervous people sometimes do before a journey. In this white light of the café, she was perhaps ten per cent less lovely than she had been outside — ten per cent less daunting — and that was enough, along with the fading high, to make his decision. He had a theory that one could recognise those strangers who were potential friends; that the soul knew its natural allies. Today, on a swashbuckling whim, he resolved to test this theory. She was just lovely enough, he felt just reckless enough. He took his cup to her table. It was okay. All the greases of marijuana were in his jaws, and he knew that he could swallow the whole world if he tried.

In any case, he introduced himself to Emily, and within minutes each knew how the other looked blushing and how the other laughed when about to reveal something personal, something which not even their families or lovers knew. Something that you could tell only to a stranger. He felt, what he had rarely felt before, the precarious and fright-

ening exhilaration of telling the exact truth as far as he knew it. And it came again, the sensation that had come when he had spied her from the bus, and now that he had time to explore the sensation he was able to identify it in all its parts. It was as if each of them understood something precious, as if each knew half of some great secret about the heart of things, and if they only took care to match their secrets together some strange and wonderful communion must be the result.

Her hair was cut short, like the hair of an elf in a fairytale, and her fingers played constantly around her collar, giving him to understand that the cut was relatively new. Her clothes were clean and simple and good; her nails short and slightly bitten. He learned that she came from a wealthy family, yet she was shy until you reached the hard core of her and a small look of apology was constantly in her eyes. When she smiled — and she smiled often — her lips drew fractionally beyond the teeth to give a hint of the shape of her skull. Some spring flowers were in her lapel, blue on grey, and the flowers made him think of a song by Billie Holiday called 'Violets For Your Furs'.


Wanton with adventure he decided to miss his train and take the next — and when it came he simply could not believe that thirty minutes had passed so quickly. She told him that she had skipped a train too. He looked away, because everything about her pleased him. Even the fact that she was married pleased him, since it rendered them threatless to each other. They scribbled telephone numbers on the back of place-mats and he appended his address against the next time she should visit his half of the city. When finally he left the table he felt some new and tender thread snap within him.

She, nocturnal, faintly embarrassed, telephoned the following night and they talked until he could stay awake no longer. He called her a few days later, then she called him again. Each time he told her more; telling things that all his nature and education insisted one should not tell. Within a week he had told her how Pat and he had lost last year entirely to acid and barbiturates; within ten days he had described the loss of his virginity; within two weeks they had compared notes on religion, sexual practices, minor criminal escapades. She told him that she thought herself a frustrated lover of danger. She told him that if she were ever unfaithful, she would like to do it in the next room to her husband. She said that that would excite her. He told her about the strange symptoms of his body, the meals heavy and undigested within him like the memory of a blow to the stomach; the minor cuts and bruises that refused to heal. When his skin began to crawl he told her about that too, and was relieved to hear the shape of her smile in her reply. She said it sounded like that LSD again. Saying the right thing always, always.

Of course it wasn't that, not really. He did not take acid any more. It had proven too much value for money, and he could not afford another lost year. He took few soft drugs and fewer hard, yet he had never felt so high.

He felt that he had a secret which made him superior to other men. He could not stop smiling. Something of joy was abroad in him, and the knowledge of how it felt to be blessed.





He said he had never told anybody else the things that he told her, and she said, "No, of course not." He told her he was glad he had come to her table in the café, and she said that she was glad too. He regretted telling her nothing, not even the things you should not tell, the things no one should tell. He knew that you could make mistakes that way. Sometimes you told people too much and they came too close, too quickly: you knew that you should not trust them so close but you trusted them anyway, and later, hurting, you wondered why. And that was just the way of things; that was just the way things always were. But not with her. Emily listened and understood, encouraged him to laugh at the things he had been ashamed to tell her, absolved him of everything. He had not known that it was possible to have a friend so close; had not known that he even desired it. Yet his flesh continued to crawl.

Pat's skin had never crawled, and Pat had been taking it longer than Billy. Pat still sat up every night, tripping sleepless, making and melting his candles. Harmless, single-minded, childlike. Pat's eyes, which had always been his loot with women, were become prodigies of success now that his mind was no longer discernable behind them: a boyish, drug-shot syrup had fermented in his gaze sufficient to clog the arteries and stop the hearts of a certain type of woman who, eighteen months before, might have been all elbows and shoulders to him. Yet Pat did not seem to care very much. The candles interested him: the candles and nothing else. The living-room hung thick and viscous and heavy with the wax smell that was like the smell of a church or meat killed fresh. Every night Pat cut by millimetres a new celebrity from wax; every morning he lit and snuffed the wick. Only when they had melted sufficiently to look more like candles than people was Pat ever satisfied with them. There was something of brilliance in his creations, and something more of sickness and deformity. Row upon row, crowding out every shelf and table, Pat's candles resembled nothing so much as the congregation in a Hollywood church minutes after the first nuclear strike. Somewhere a scooped shoulder bone-white beneath a bright ball-gown, or a waist slung with gunbelts and filigreed fine with wax. Here a hand bereft of wrist, affixed improbably to a bare thigh and clutching a coiled whip; there a face half-recognisable, dripped onto the chest of an Air Force uniform. Elvis Presley in the middle of the coffee-table, known only by the flares of his jumpsuit and the jewels in his belt; Marlon Brando beside him, quite anonymous, just a two-inch stub of boots and blue jeans

and the waist of a jacket. In front of them a pair of legs that represented Fats Waller, and a smear of brown wax across the teeth of a keyboard; Josephine Baker just a pair of feet tripping through a lumpen puddle into which red paint had haemorrhaged. And then Claude Rains — Pat's best joke — Claude Rains from *The Invisible Man*, who was not there at all.

Pat loved these candles and he could not understand people who did not love them too. He could not understand Billy, who had thought the candles a rare joke once but had grown to hate them from a special place of loathing in his heart. The candles made Billy think of his nightmare, and they made him think of the way his flesh crept sometimes, at night. Pat would neither sell the candles nor destroy them, and Billy would not beg him.

He was burning a candle when Billy came in. The room was dark but for the light of the candle and the light of the television screen; dark and draped about with the smell of wax. Pat's eyes were on the screen and he did not seem to notice the hot stiffening trails of wax running across his skin. A television chef was busy demonstrating a new kind of soufflé dish. Having never known Pat to cook anything more complicated than oven chips, Billy wondered what he could be seeing on the screen to interest him so much.

He said, "Pat. Your fingers. Jesus."

Pat glanced down at his hand then back at the screen. "Good morning to you too," he said.

"Good morning Pat."

"Good morning Billy. I'd like to introduce you to Farrah. She's an angel. Do you like her?" When Pat held up the candle his hand shook and a gob of wax splashed across Farrah's midriff.

"No," Billy said. "I hate her."

"Oh. Really?"

"Really. I hate all these things. You know I hate them."

"This is what I do."

On the television the chef had put away the soufflé dish and was now holding up a pair of fondue forks.

"I still hate them," said Billy.

"I hate your boots," said Pat. "And that stupid coat. I hate your boots and your coat but I don't say anything about them, do I, because they're you."

"Yes," said Billy. "Thank you for that." He opened the door. He said, "If anyone calls..."

"Anyone, meaning...?"

"Meaning anyone," he said.

What it was, was his name: those two chanting syllables, the chime-glass sound that they made like the notes you might whistle to call



a dog; that diminutive ending with its soft 'L' sound, as if it might be an adverb floating loose from a sentence. His name a child's name which even as a child he had not wanted: a name utterly worthless until you coupled to it a cognomen devised a century before. He thought upon the outlaw William Bonney, infamous killer, man most wanted, hanged at the age of twenty-one for twenty-one murders. Suddenly his name had dimensions of danger, of edginess. Billy might be the name of Hopelessness itself, a gimcrack noun engineered out of one weak gulp and one tired exhalation, but Billy the Kid — well that was another thing entirely; Billy the Kid was one beautiful bitter draft of a way to introduce yourself to an enemy.

In times past he had even had the hat — that gunslinger's genuine full-beaver crown — to bestow whatever courage and anger his daily life might require. A very font of power it was too, this Stetson, potent as the headdress of a medicine man, and wearing it Billy could sometimes hear William Bonney himself whispering into his ear, asking him what had he done lately, what revenges had he worked, was he proud of himself today? But then with the frosts, bizarrely, the hat had grown misshapen, slackened until it sagged over his eyes and proved an actual danger to him, and Billy had no choice but to throw it into the back of a cupboard, there to muster. But the Stetson had worked its full quota of magic, and he still heard William Bonney's voice sometimes, whispering. Now it was just the boots — so slick and righteously shiny, that timed his walking with a hard dry sound like roulette balls in the wheel — and the long draped coat like those the Earp brothers wore in photographs, in the movies. Billy did not explain this to anyone, except Emily.

"Of course," she said. "It's your armour, isn't it?"

Just as simple as that, just stating the fact of it. Just simple and generous. Taking this strangest part of him and accepting it. Making something good from it. Like the best of literature, Emily spoke to something inside him that he had not even known was there.

He saw her irregularly — every two months perhaps — and on the third meeting he surprised them both by kissing her. He could not help it. Half a year they had been building a shelter from the bombs and artillery of the world, and half a year had huddled alone together in the shelter hearing the explosions walking the world above them, and under the circumstances perhaps it would have been a greater surprise if he had not kissed her.

They were in the railway station again, and it was autumn and the trees around the station were without leaves, and you could see the

trunks and branches dark with rain against the rain-dark sky, and Emily was standing close to him with her feet between his feet, her breath coming pale in the cold and vanishing and coming pale again, and he found himself tilting up her face as one tilts an open book into the light. Her lips were without warmth and almost without movement, and he thought that that would be it. But then some decision flicked across her eyes and she came close again, and he felt the toes of her shoes against the insteps of his. Now she kissed him, kissing with such art and craft of lip and tongue and tooth that it was like a hot nail driven sweetly into his guts, where she was not touching him at all. And then once more, one final time before leaving, and the nail was roughly wrenched from inside him and he could not even bear to watch her through the doors of the train. He tried to walk away but for a moment he simply could not move; he tried to swallow but his throat was closed. Later he recalled that he also had his last genuine erection.

Just that afternoon she had told him that she felt nothing romantic nor anything sexual between them. He did not know what it meant, and he felt weak in the face of his ignorance.

Needing to see her again he invited her to the flat the next week. He introduced her to Pat and showed her the candles and she paled and grew quiet and he knew that she was disturbed, by Pat and by his candles and by his strange way of looking at you.

She said, "Is that those barbiturate things?"

He said, "No, I think that's the acid."

They sat together a long time but he did not touch her nor she him and, in an effort to restore something lost, he told her without prompting his few remaining secrets, and she listened with patience but without reciprocation. That day he would have given her anything she asked for but she did not ask for anything.

And that night the crawling of his flesh was an agony to him. He lay awake in the dark and he switched on no light because he had done that once before, and it had proven worse to see what was happening than to imagine it. The scurrying waves of skin; the tiny myriad effect like some subcutaneous phalanx of insects hurried and unstoppable; the crumpling and bubbling and running, like something burning, like a plastic sheet moved above a flame. Yet when he put his fingers to his skin he found that there was nothing beneath it at all. It was exactly as if his flesh were trying to escape from him, as if it were trying crawl away secretly in the dark.

He had seen a pattern to this which he did not want to have to understand. He could predict with certainty when the flesh would creep;





and, with only a little less certainty, when the nightmare would come.

He called it a nightmare, but in truth it was a nightmare only in the way that a tiger is a cat or a tsunami a wave. It was the kind of nightmare that abuses your waking life; the kind that draws out your belly tight as a drumskin and plays rhythms upon your taut nerves and leaves you wired and hurried and breathless. A nightmare from outside the normal measure of nightmare, a nightmare which appeared like a message from some unconscious part of him, a skywritten warning, a reminder of the signs that he had passed on the road from the station café to here but had somehow contrived to ignore. It was a vision of his destination. The figure at the end of the nightmare was Emily, and Emily had betrayed him.

At times he wished that he had never met her; at other times he marvelled that he could ever have wished such a thing. At night, suffering alone, he would promise all the gods of heaven and earth that he would never speak to her again; and in the morning he would hear the voice of William Bonney, asking if he was truly such a coward.

There was a second condition. The other was not enough on its own to bring the nightmare. Enough to make his flesh crawl, yes, but not to bring the nightmare. The nightmare required this second condition, like having the correct oven temperature for a recipe even after you have all the right ingredients in the right proportions. Billy knew that this condition existed — knew it with that unformed but certain conviction that attends one's sleeping knowledge — but he could not have told you what it was. He might have felt that he could come close to it, might have fumbled after words to describe it, but finally the attempt would defeat him and he would have to give up. No conscious words would fit its shape. But in his sleep he recognised it, and by it he sensed that the nightmare would come. Waking he knew only that it was Emily, that it was something to do with Emily.

That winter, snow thickened the branches of the trees outside his window and snowmelt dripped slowly in the sunlight, and he asked her whether she had ever suffered from nightmares that seemed more like premonitions. She said that she did not believe in such things, and said nothing more, and with this Billy knew that he was losing her. He knew it even when the next morning's post brought a small black and white hand-lettered sign to hang in his room, sweetly macabre, reading 'Duerme bien, Querido' — which means 'Sleep well, Dear One' — the words cut by William Bonney's girlfriend into Bonney's gravestone. Billy hung the sign above his bed and he tried to feel happy but could not.

He had a strong sensation that at some unknown point in the past something had hung in the balance between them, and the balance had tipped away without his knowledge. Perhaps it had been at the railway station. Perhaps it had been there. Perhaps Emily had felt that enough was enough, and too much too much, and that she owed what remained of her to her husband.

The end came, of all things, over a telephone call. Billy came in to find Pat hanging up the receiver, hasty and strangely flustered. It was unusual for Pat to use the tele-

phone at all, and before Billy made his own call he asked whether Pat had quite finished. By way of reply Pat switched on the television to watch a chef comparing three different types of grapefruit knife. Billy had met a girl in a club the previous night and the girl had given him her number, and he had thought to speak to her tonight. Finding the number engaged he went to shower. Pat's gaze followed him from the room. When Billy came out he tried again. He hit the Redial button and found himself speaking to Emily. Disoriented for a moment he looked at Pat but Pat was staring at the television screen.

They spoke for a long time, saying nothing, exchanging remarks like weak players exchanging chess pieces. Looking for the phrase that would open the mouth of the cave, the note that would bring down the wall. Finding no phrase and no note. Finding no purchase at all. Emily, lunging desperate as a fighter in the last moments of a bout, enquired after his nightmare, and he replied vaguely, disappointed in her, telling her by the very tone of his voice that this was the wrong question. But he had not wanted her to abandon the effort, and when he realised that she had done so he felt hopelessness run over him like the shadow of a bird, and he made a gamble which even in the act of speaking he knew would fail, saying to her what he had said no more than half a dozen times in his life before. Something stupid which he had no business saying, something which made Emily fall silent and hang up without response.

Afterwards he kept asking himself why he had said it, then cursing himself for asking. Cursing because he knew the answer already. He had said it because he wanted Emily back; because he wanted to hear her reply.

Hanging up the telephone he felt something new inside his body — some massive thing with sharp edges that cut his guts and his heart — and by this feeling he knew that he had told her nothing but the truth. He stared, stupid and numbed, at the corner of the telephone and the light reflected there from the television screen. Moments later he found himself in the kitchen, staring at a splash of grease burned onto one of the cooker rings: just staring as if the very shapelessness of this thing contained some important message for him. He felt like a man condemned, knowing that some heavy sentence must fall upon him soon.

Later he retrieved the misshapen Stetson from the cupboard and went out in coat and boots and hat and walked around aimless, muttering like a man lonely and drunken, cursing Pat, cursing himself, cursing God and time and fate and chance, cursing Emily's husband whom he had never even met. Some kids shouted from the pavement opposite — "Fucking cowboy!" — and he stepped across the road and ignoring all known and recognised rituals of the situation punched the closest one in the face. He felt the kid's nose and mouth disappear beneath his fist, as if they had never been there at all, as if he had punched water or some soft thing like a cushion. And there was blood, of course — blood and a sort of suspended, wavering silence — but nothing else, no words, no retaliation, just blood and silence and a single moment stretching like elastic between the fingers until the kids turned and ran.



The kid he had punched ran with his hand to his mouth, lopsided, lagging half a street behind his friends. Billy could hear the voice of William Bonney in his ear, shrill with congratulation, but he knew that he had not wanted this. His heart was not with William Bonney, or here on the street fighting teenage boys. His heart was elsewhere. It was on the telephone and the platform of the railway station, in the timetables and the digits of her phone number and in some house that he had never seen, on the far side of the city. His heart was in every place except his home, but there was nowhere else for him to go.

Pat looked up from the television and said, "Billy. Billy." On screen a chef was tilting a pair of unseasonal mince pies to the camera, and studio lights ran on their glazed surface as if across the cover of a paperback book.

"What?"

"We should maybe talk about it."

"There's nothing to say." Billy scratched his shoulder because he could feel the flesh moving. If the nightmare was truly a prophecy, then tonight was the night it must come true. "There's nothing to say."

"Billy, I got to tell you —"

"Who's that?"

"Who's what?"

"Who's that you're making?"

Pat looked at the candle as if he had not noticed it before, as if some magician had spirited it into his hand without his knowledge.

"This?" he said. "This is Bergman from *Casablanca*. You know, at the end where she gets on the plane."

"I never saw it."

"You never saw *Casablanca*? Really never saw *Casablanca*? *Casablanca*. I got it on tape Billy, you want to see it?"

"I'm tired."

"It's short. You're gonna love it." Pat put the candle down and stepped to the rack of videotapes behind the television. Billy scratched his shoulder, and then his neck.

"I'm tired Pat. I'm going to bed."

"But you haven't seen *Casablanca*! We have to rectify that situation, Billy. We have to rectify that situation. Trust me, the ending. Bogart. Bergman. You're gonna cry, Billy, you're gonna —"

"I'm going to bed."

"You won't sleep."

"I don't want to stay up."

He was misery itself. He did not want to have to fight.

He went to bed and he switched out the light and he lay in the dark and waited, remembering what he had said to Emily this afternoon, feeling the itching and creeping of flesh along his bones. He told himself that perhaps it would not happen, perhaps there would be no nightmare. He could not remain awake and he did not want to have to sleep. Sleep seemed to him a labyrinth vast and unpredictable with terrors. He would watch the darkness in all its colours pulse before his eyes and his body would unhitch from the bed and slip out upon the tide and then the memory would return and a rebellious flutter of skin, and he would have to restrain his own sobbing. Awake he heard the chime of the telephone hung up and, later, knocking at the door

and subdued voices male and female, and he knew what these things meant and knew the final ingredients of his nightmare.

He awoke, barely knowing that he had slept, to unbearable abrasions of the sheet upon his body. Quite naked. It had happened as he had known that it would. The signposts, the destination. He knew that he must move. It was an agony to climb from his bed and walk through the flat. His feet shrieked pain at every step and fibres of carpet adhered to his soles; the cold air was like a thousand blades crosshatched upon his nerves. A coat hung upon a door brushed his arm and the pain was too great even to cry out. Filaments of blood quivered between arm and fabric. He was not frightened any more, although he knew that he should be; he was not even angry, although he knew what he was bound to see in the next room. He felt like an actor, acting his own dream. He entered the living-room upon a hot wind but this was nothing more than his own neurones splashing fire across his flayed body. And there they were, on the sofa, ringed about with candles, the two of them sleepy and golden and tangled with love in the flickering light, both of them naked before him but not one tenth so naked as Billy himself.

Emily was first to see him there, and her cry made Pat look up. Billy saw certain expressions rise to their faces like sunken objects rising to the surface of agitated water, and with these expressions he was propelled into the next stage of his nightmare. There was a mirror beside the door and the nightmare had always ended at the moment when he turned his eyes to the mirror. In the nightmare he had never seen his own reflection. But this time when he looked it was to see his eyes looking back at him, strange and wide and bright as wax dripped into mince. The small muscles in his neck and cheeks twitching; the larger muscles in his abdomen clutching as if to vomit. Like the opening illustration in a book of home medicine, like the victim of some astonishing torture. The rebellion quite complete.

Emily's fingers went to her mouth and hovered there and moved away. Her hair like the hair of an elf, the new haircut become old, the gum visible between tooth and lip.

She said "Billy," and "Billy" again and then nothing more.

### Toxic Epidermal Necrolysis

TEN: rare life-threatening syndrome with general epidermal loss and mucosal erosions. Associated with long-term abuse of antibiotics, barbiturates; introverted, neurotic personalities. Prognosis has improved with admission to burns unit as standard management. Parallels with Apache Indian 'skin-scraping' courting archetypes are discussed in this review.

AU: Mix, André

AD: Dpt of Social Anthropology, Univ. Birmingham, Alabama

SO: American-Journal-Myth-Legend. 1995 Nov; 37(4) 167-75

**JASON FROWLEY** went to study in St Andrews ten years ago and decided he liked it there. At some point during his stay he received a PhD in Psychology. The citation at the end of the above story is fictional, but the syndrome it describes is real. Jason's first ever published story was 'Once Were Giants' in TTA13.





Jeff VanderMeer

FLIGHT IS FOR THOSE WHO  
HAVE NOT YET CROSSED OVER



**THE ONLY SOUNDS INSIDE THE PRISON ARE THE** drip of water, the weeping of prisoners, and the *chink-chink* of keys on Gabriel de Anda's belt as he limps through his 2am rounds of the third floor. The prison walls glow with green phosphorescence and, from far below, Gabriel can hear the ocean crashing against the rocks. A storm builds out in the Gulf, where sargasso clings to drowned sailors and does not allow them to sink into the formless dark of deep waters. Gabriel feels the storm in the pressure of air pushing against his face and it makes him wary.

He has been a guard at the prison for so long that he can see it in his mind like a slowly-turning, dark-glittering jewel. The Indians call the prison 'Where Death Walks Blind of Justice'. It is a block of badly-mortared concrete, surrounded by barbed wire, electric fences, and jungle. Resembling nothing less than the head of a tortured, anguished beast at sleep, a twenty-four hour lamp at the front entrance its solitary eye, it hunkers three stories tall, with tiny barred windows checkering a brackish, badly-lit interior where bare bulbs shine down on graffiti, guard and prisoner alike. No one has ever escaped, for the prison, its foundations rotting, dominates the top of a cliff on the eastern coast of that country known more for its general, El Toreador, than for its given name, a name once Indian, then Spanish, but now forgotten.

Gabriel's rumpled uniform scratches his back and fits poorly at the crotch. He shuffles over the filthy catwalk that leads from one side of the third floor to the other. Muttering to himself, he fights the urge to spit over the side, into the central courtyard, where the secret police hose down the violent prisoners. His gimp leg throbs.

When only twenty-two, Gabriel was visiting Merida, Mexico, his brother Pedro driving and jabbering about some girl he knew in Mexico City 'with thighs like heaven; no, better than heaven'. Enraptured, Pedro took a curve too quickly and careened into oncoming traffic. Gabriel remembers only a high-pitched scream and the pain that shattered his left leg, the bone breaking in two places.

It gave him a limp. It gave him grist to chew as he navigates the catwalk. The janitors have not cleaned the catwalk from the last food riot. Dark, scattered lumps form an obstacle course, exude the stench of rotted fruit and flesh. What sweet relief it would be to press his face up to one of the outer windows; then he would see, framed by moonlight, the breakers far below tumbling against a black sand beach. The first refreshing hint of summer gales might touch his face in forgiveness, but afterwards, he would only have to return to the catwalk and the last prisoner, Roberto D'Souza.

Roberto D'Souza has been held for five days and nights, charged with aiding the guerrillas who live in the northern mountains and call themselves Zapata. Gabriel has nothing but contempt for the rebels. If not for them, rationing would be less severe and goods would be more plentiful in the stores.

Gabriel's pace quickens, for he can leave once he has checked on D'Souza. He can drive the twenty miles to his small house outside Carbajal, the capital, and his wife, Sessina. She has worked late hours setting up window displays and may still be awake, perhaps even have supper waiting for him: huevos rancheros with hot tamales. His stomach rumbles thinking about it.

But first, D'Souza.

D'Souza sits in the corner farthest from the bars and the only window, his knees drawn up tight against his chest. Gabriel sneezes from the stench of shit and piss, wonders yet again if it is necessary to deny political prisoners a chamberpot. Why haven't the janitors at least hosed down the cell?

None of the cells have their own illumination and so Gabriel shines his flashlight on D'Souza. D'Souza's back is crisscrossed with red and black. Where whole, the skin appears yellow. The spine juts, each bone distinct, below a ragged mop of black hair.

As the light hits him, D'Souza flinches, hides his head, and tries to disappear into a wall pitted from years of abuse. Gabriel flinches too, despite himself. He must remember that this man is an enemy of the state, a guerilla, a terrorist.

"Number 255," Gabriel says, to confirm and then leave, limping, for home.

No answer.

"Your name, please," Gabriel says.

D'Souza does not stir, but when his voice comes, it has a wiry strength, a determination ill-matched to the wasted body. "Roberto Almada D'Souza."

"Good evening to you, Roberto."

"Is it? A good evening?" Weariness in the voice.

"The sky is clear outside, as you could see if you looked. The waves are still low. Tomorrow, though..."

"I don't need to see. I can smell it. I can taste it. Rotted wood and salt and the last breaths of lost lovers. Can't you feel it? It will blow us all away."

Unfolding his long arms and legs, D'Souza rises with gangly imprecision. He is shrouded in shadow shot through with flashes of skin as he turns toward Gabriel, who cannot see his eyes.

D'Souza says, "I have children. A father who is blind. How can I feed them from in here?"

"My father is dead."

In the coffin, his father still wore the shabby black blazer and grey trousers from his days in prison, looking like an actor trapped in an old black-and-white silent movie.

"Should I feel sorry for you?" D'Souza says after a swift scrutiny of Gabriel's face.

"Tell them what they need to know and they will let you go."

A frustrated sigh. "I cannot tell them what I do not know."

"Everyone is innocent here," Gabriel says.

"Everyone except for you."

"It's a living."

"Is it?"

"Good night," Gabriel says and turns to leave.

"Would you take a message to my wife?" The faltering timbre of D'Souza's voice, the anticipation, the hope, sends a tremor down Gabriel's spine, even as he faces the prisoner.

"What?"

"My wife's name is Maria. Maria D'Souza. She lives in Carbajal, in the projects. Please. It is not very far. She is tall and thin and has hair as long and thick as the silk of angels. Please. Her name is Maria. Tell her where I am. Tell her I think of her. Tell her to visit my father and let him know where I am. Her name is Maria."

Inside of Gabriel, something comes loose. A lurching nausea, a dislocation. It will pass, he tells himself. It has



always passed before, no matter how they plead — which is not often because most times they just sit and stare at the walls.

But he says only, “No. I cannot.”

“Please?”

“No.”

D’Souza comes swiftly to the front of the cell, silent, his white, white skin stretched over his scarecrow frame, mottled by moonlight and shadow. His hands around the bars are grey and splashed with a violet colour that would be red by any other light. D’Souza has burning pink flesh instead of fingernails. His face is a welter of dried blood and yellowing bruises. An apparition from the Night of All Saints, a carnival figure, but too grim for a clown. D’Souza stares at Gabriel and Gabriel, transfixed, stares back, wondering at the passing resemblance to his brother Pedro, the drawn cheekbones, the fiery black eyes, the anger that pins him, helpless: a priest hearing a confession, a vessel to be filled.

“Do you know what they have done to me?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Gabriel is not a member of the secret police, but he has at times come to a cell at the wrong time and seen things that have made him retrace his steps while thinking desperately about the current football scores and his country’s chances in the 1998 World Cup. *A door left open. A shriek, abruptly cut off. Blood under the fingernails.*

D’Souza’s hand snakes out from between the bars. He clutches Gabriel’s wrist so hard it throbs. Gabriel smells the blood and filth on D’Souza, feels the sticky cool softness of D’Souza’s nail-less thumb against his palm. He struggles, wrenches away from that touch, backpedals out of reach, confronted with a rage accumulated not over years but days.

“I must shit where I eat and I eat nothing because they what they feed me is less than nothing. They come at all hours, without warning, with electric cattleprods. They beat me. They have torn my fingernails out. They have attached electric wires — ”

“Shut up!”

“ — to my scrotum and stuck needles up my penis. They have tried to make me confess to crimes I haven’t committed, never committed... They are tireless and well-fed and confident, and I am none of these things. I was a painter before they took me. Now I am nothing.”

“I said to shut up!”

But Gabriel does not pull out his nightstick or walk away from the cell. His lack of action mystifies him. He cannot understand why he finds it so difficult to breathe.

D’Souza loses his balance, slides slowly down the bars, into the darkness of the floor. “Take a message to my wife or do not take a message to my wife...” And then, in a self-

mocking tone: “It truly does not matter. I have dreamed of flying to her myself, you know. Flying over this country of El Toreador. My arms are like wings and I can feel the wind cool against my face. All the stars are out and there are no clouds. Such a clear, clean darkness. It seems almost a miracle, such clarity... Below me I can make out the shapes of banana plantations and textile factories. I can tell the green of the rainforest from that of the pampas. I see the ruins of the Maya and the shapes of mountains, distant...and yet when I wake I am still here, in my cell, and I know I am lost.”

D’Souza looks up at Gabriel, the whites of his eyes gleaming through the broken mask of his face and says, “My wife’s name is Maria D’Souza. When I have died, you must tell her so she can come for my body.”

**BY THE TIME GABRIEL HAS STUMBLERD BACK ALONG** the third floor catwalk, ducking the swinging light bulbs,

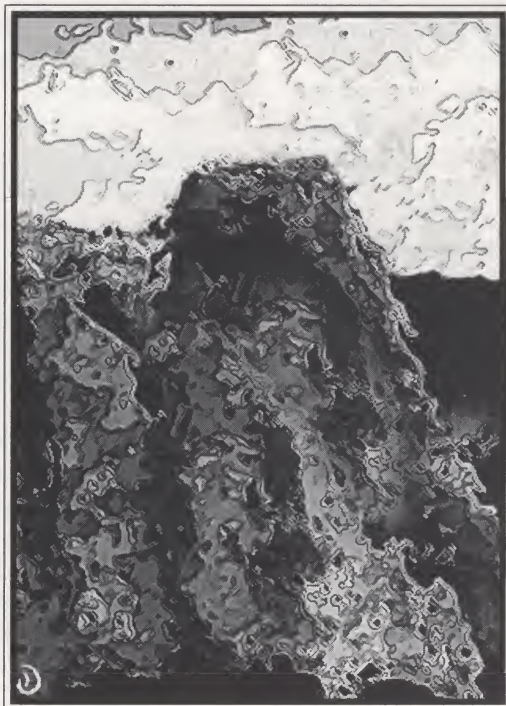
and down to the second floor and finally the first; by the time he has passed through the endless security checkpoints in the first floor administrative offices where the secret police lounge, still wearing sunglasses; by the time he has lit a cigarette and limped through the rain-slicked parking lot to his beat-up VW, he has managed to distance himself from D’Souza and think of other things. The car, for instance, which is a present from Pedro, now a used car salesman in Mexico City, perhaps not where he wanted to be at fifty, but happy. It is like the shedding of some insidious skin, this thinking of other things.

The car crankily shifts into gear and Gabriel turns on the headlights. He backs out under the glare of the moth-smothered lamp post and drives past the outer ring of guard stations, waving at his friend

Alberto, who is good for a game of pool or poker on the weekends.

The road is bumpy and ill-marked, but as Gabriel speeds down it he reaches an exhausted calm; his shoulders untense and he slides back in the seat, slouching but comfortable. Mottled shadows broken by glints of water reflect the stars. There is no traffic at this hour, the bright murals and billboards depicting El Toreador muted, rendered indistinct by a night littered with broken street lamps.

Magnified by the hush of surrounding trees, the silence is unbroken, except for the chugging huff of Gabriel’s VW, the even sound of which reminds him of an old Mickey Mouse alarm clock; the ticking had more than once lulled him to sleep, wedged between three brothers on a small bed. His father had been alive then, and they had been poor, although well-off compared to some families, until he’d been caught selling drugs to supplement their income. A thin, short man in a shabby black blazer and grey trousers too baggy for his





legs; eyes that had once reflected laughter become as flat and grey as slate; shoeless feet a flurry of scars from working hard labour in the quarries. Mother had had to find work in a clothes factory, making bright cotton designer shirts that would be shipped off to the United States, to be sold in shopping malls with names like 'Oaks' and 'Shady Brook'.

**THE SILENCE, THEN, AND THE SPACE, WHICH** allows Gabriel to pretend that nothing surrounds him, that the road passes through an infinite bubble encompassing the sky, and within that bubble he is the only person alive; that once he passes through the silence and space, washed clean by it, when he is home, he enters his second life.

Glancing at the stars, Gabriel gets a crumpled feeling in his chest. Once, he had dreamed of flying as a career: a commercial pilot or a member of the airforce, like his grandfather. His grandfather — Ricardo Jesus de Anda — whose hands were so soft and supple it was difficult to remember that he was a hard man who had spent many nights in his MiG defending the country's borders from attack. Before the coup, his grandfather shot down three F-15s in four hours over Honduras and they gave him a medal. The next day, he was at Gabriel's house, laughing, holding a beer, and looking at the ground in embarrassment while Gabriel's mother detailed his exploits. And Gabriel had thought, *What could it possibly be like to fly at such a speed, no longer bound by the earth, curving the air with the violence of your passage?*

Gabriel's leg begins to throb and he remembers D'Souza saying, "When I am dead..."

He stops thinking and stares ahead, at the road. Soon he pulls into the gravel driveway of his four room house. It forms part of a state-sponsored housing project, not much different from the relocation sites made available to Indian tribes uprooted from the mountains. His house is constructed of unpainted concrete, single-storey, with the gracelessness of a building block. As the VW comes to a stop, Gabriel blinks his headlights three times before turning them off, so that if Sessina is awake she will not mistake him for the police.

Gabriel knocks on the front door and then unlocks it himself, certain she is in the kitchen, preparing his meal. Inside, Gabriel can smell rice, beans and eggs. Sessina has turned off the lights to conserve electricity and he has to orient himself by the glow of the kitchen and the television in the living room. The bedroom is off to the left. They share an outdoor bathroom with the couple in the house next door. The living room wall is half wallpapered, half rude concrete.

"Sessina?" he says. "Are you in the kitchen?"

"Yes," comes the muffled reply. "You are late."

Gabriel unbuttons his shirt, places his guard's cap on the baroque iron hat rack. Another present from Pedro.

"A little trouble with a prisoner," Gabriel says. "Nothing to worry about."

"What?" she says as he walks into the living room. A replay of the football game is still on and the national team is up three to two, with thirty minutes to play. The green sofa calls to him, but he disciplines himself and walks into the kitchen, shielding his eyes from the angry white light of the naked bulb that hangs there.

"I said I had a little trouble with a prisoner."

Sessina stands before the stove, spatula in hand. The light illuminates her face in such a way that her beauty is almost painful to him. Her hair is black and shines a faint metallic blue, her eyes large and evenly-spaced, her nose small and slightly upturned, her lips full and liberally painted with red lipstick. She still wears the dress she wore to Garcia's Department Store in downtown Carbajal, but she has taken off her black pumps. The grace of her small feet, their contours clearly visible through her pantyhose, makes him smile. He comes close to her and touches her lightly on the shoulder.

She smiles a tired smile and says, "It was a long day at the store, too. I had three window displays to set up. We finished very late; I got home after eleven. Sit down and watch the game. I'll bring you your dinner."

A peck on the cheek and back to her skillet.

Although Gabriel wants to linger, wants to say how good she looks to him, he walks into the living room. The sofa springs are old and he sinks into the cushions with a grateful sigh. His back muscles untense and only now does he really feel sleepy, lazy, relaxed. He lets the low hum of the announcer's voice, broken by moments of excitement, lead him into a half doze.

After eighteen years, Gabriel is still bewildered that Sessina agreed to marry him, although at the time he must have appeared to be a man who would make something of his life. But then had come the leg injury, Pedro having whisked him away for a 'little bachelor fun' a month before the marriage. While Gabriel was still in Mexico, El Toreador staged his successful coup and his grandfather was stripped of his rank, forced to retire because he had refused to join El Toreador.

"Stay in Mexico," Pedro pleaded. "Don't go back. I'm not going back. No one can make me go back. It will be Guatemala all over again. *Don't go back.*"

But he had gone back. He remembered getting off the plane and walking onto the escalators at the airport and, seeing the black-red banners of El Toreador, realizing it was not his country anymore. Until he saw Sessina waiting for him. And then it didn't matter.

"Here you are," Sessina says, and hands Gabriel a steaming plate of rice, beans and huevos rancheros. From beside him, Sessina kneads his back in just the right spot while the game drones on.

"Thank you," he says, and begins to eat.

"What was the trouble with the prisoner?"

"He wanted me to get a message to his wife," he says between bites of food.

"And what did you say?"

"No, of course."

"Did you have to say no?"

"He's a prisoner, Sessina."

"What did he do to get put into prison?"

"Traitorous things. A traitor to the country. An enemy of the state."

"Oh. That explains why your back is so tight. Was it difficult to say no?"

Gabriel shrugs, then shouts "Yes!" when the national team scores again. The television blips to a news brief: more bad news about the economy, three murders in the southern city of Bajala were still unsolved, and a boy had





poured a pot of boiling water over a puppy and felt no guilt. The last item makes Gabriel feel sick inside.

"How terrible."

"People are terrible," murmurs his wife. "You could find another job."

They have discussed this before, it is old news, and Gabriel does not answer.

Sessina's hands draw larger and slower circles across his back. Soon the hands stop moving altogether.

"Sessina?"

Gabriel finishes his meal and puts his plate next to him on the sofa. He carefully lifts Sessina's arms away from him and sets them down in her lap. He turns off the television and walks into the kitchen holding the dishes, puts them in the sink.

A rosary hangs on the wall over the faucet, on a nail, and next to that, a photograph of his grandfather, beside his MiG, smiling with his wide mouth so that his tan, leathery forehead crinkles up even further. Sunglasses hide his eyes.

Gabriel turns away and comes back to the couch. Sessina still lies there, her mouth half-open, her breaths shallow, the top two buttons of her wrinkled white blouse unbuttoned.

When they married, Sessina had aspirations of a modelling career. Now she dresses up the porcelain-perfect mannequins that decorate the window displays of Garcia's Department Store. In the bustle and fatigue of day-to-day living, the dream had slipped away from her, fragment by fragment, until she must have forgotten, or believed she had never dreamt of such a thing.

And does she, Gabriel asks himself, stare into my eyes and think the same thoughts, and there we both are, caught in moments that trickle away endlessly, lost in the inertia of doing the same rituals over and over?

Looking down at Sessina, her beauty remote from him, a movie image, not flesh and blood, Gabriel knows he still loves her — a sudden intake of breath when he sees her at night, a palpitation of his heart, the sense that even caught in the morass of simply living she makes it worthwhile. Yet there is such distance, as if, were he to reach out and touch her, he would find that she is really miles away.

*D'Souza, pressed up against the bars of his prison cell.* Might Sessina have met his wife in Garcia's shopping for clothes or perfume? How difficult would it be to simply whisper, "*Your husband is in prison.*"

Gabriel gathers Sessina up, a feather weight in his arms, and she locks her arms around his neck and, half-asleep, nuzzles up against him. Not bothering to turn on the light, Gabriel takes her into their bedroom, past the chest of drawers with the photographs of her mother and father, Pedro, and Gabriel's mother; another of his grandfather, months before his death. He lays Sessina on the bed and undresses her. Instead of turning the covers down, he slips out of his shoes, sheds his trousers and unbuttons three buttons on his shirt. He pulls it over his head and drops it onto the floor to join the pants.

Sessina has curled up on her side and so he slowly gets into bed opposite her, slowly makes his body fit the contours of her body. He puts a hand on her breasts and kisses her freckled back. Her skin feels warm to his touch. She makes a purring sound and reaches out with one hand to stroke



his hair. He runs a hand along the side of her hips and she arches her back until his calves come to rest against her buttocks. She is very hot; he wonders if she is a fallen angel, come streaking down from the sky, to be so hot. Such a beautiful stranger in his bed.

As he is about to fall asleep, Gabriel hears the sudden whisper of rain, and then an echo, and then a thousand voices, a speechless, rumbling patter. The storm will come in the morning, he knows, and he cocks his head to one side, as if listening beyond the sound of falling water for some other sound entirely.

**WAKING TO THE PATTERN OF RAIN AGAINST THE** roof, Gabriel looks groggily at the clock, which blinks '1:04pm'. Sessina left for her job at the department store hours ago. The bedroom window has fogged over and he smells the rising sweetness of orchids laden with moisture, bromeliads nearly choked with it. Drains gurgle with water.

Gabriel rises with a half-groan, half-yawn, his neck muscles aching. His mouth is dry; he feels parched, weak. Eyes blurry with sleep, he trudges out to the communal bathroom to take a shower, then dresses and eats a quick lunch. At three o'clock, he leaves the house, hurrying to the car under the shelter of a tattered grey umbrella. His shoes are soaked by the time he closes the VW's door. The engine starts reluctantly when he turns the key, then growls, as if the rain has done it good.

The drive to the prison takes no time at all under the grey-black sky, blurred further by his faulty wipers, so that the concrete blocks of houses, the shiny metal of cars, and the sharp straightness of trees become patternless streaks of green and brown.

As Gabriel passes through the prison gates, he begins to discard thoughts of Sessina, Pedro, the news on the television. He begins to think of his rounds, the fifteen-minute breaks he will have as the night progresses, how he will have to speak with the janitors about cleaning the third floor catwalk. He knows that the ceiling leaks and that moisture will bleed through the walls, bringing with it lizards and cockroaches.

In the administrative offices, Gabriel passes the secret policemen. They are frozen in the same positions as the night before, only now three of them smoke and one man gazes out a window at the cliff face and the downpour falling onto the black sand beach below. The sea bellows and shrieks against the rock.

These men always look the same — outwardly relaxed, but poised so exactly that Gabriel believes them guilty of a hidden tension, as if, full to bursting with secrets and mystery, they must sit just so, their clothes pressed perfectly so they resemble figures in a wax museum.

*What new secrets do they possess that they did not know yesterday?* Gabriel thinks as he checks in at the front desk.

**ADMINISTRATIVE WORK AWAITS GABRIEL AND HE** spends six hours sorting and filing various forms in a ten-by-ten room with flickering fluorescent lights. He can feel the pressure of the sea colliding against the impervious rock: the crunch of waves, maddened beyond reason, so compressed and thick that something, somewhere, must give way, the entire world unmoored.

His friend Alberto — short and swarthy and enjoyably foul-mouthed — enters three or four times to share a joke and a cigarette, but for the most part Gabriel is alone with his aching leg and the red tape of El Toreador's bureaucracy. As Gabriel places one file atop the next, one piece of paper atop another, he thinks of D'Souza's face pressed up against the bars, and then of his father's face.

Gabriel cannot remember many times that his father was not in prison, pressed up against those bars. The wan smile. The sad eyes. Gabriel can remember the feel of his mother's hand in his during those visits, the hand progressively thinner and more bony, until it seemed she was only made of bone, and then even less substantial: a gossamer strand, a dress blowing, empty, in the wind. She had survived her husband by less than three months and Gabriel knew that his incarceration, his death in jail, had diminished her, so that she had died not so much from a broken heart as from a sense of shame that burrowed beneath the skin and poisoned her every action.

The sheets of paper he collates seem as thin as his family history, the only depth provided by Pedro, who once caroused with him around a Merida traffic circle and crashed joyously into oncoming cars. Lucky Pedro, well-fed and sequestered in Mexico.

At last, Gabriel has filed the last file and he begins his rounds with the common prisoners on the first and second floors: the murderers and rapists and bank robbers.

The wind buffets the prison walls; Gabriel thinks he can almost feel the floor shift beneath his feet as if moved by that wind. Or perhaps he is just tired and afraid. Afraid of what?

Lightning strikes nearby, followed by the boom of thunder, and the lights flutter violently. The beach will be drowning in water soon and only the cliff will stop the water from rising further and flooding the interior. The rush of water is almost a second pulse.

When Gabriel reaches the third floor, he is out of breath, in darkness lit by the bare bulbs. They swing like low-strung stars, blinding him with their glare. The janitors have yet to clean the mess and he moves through it cautiously.

The guard at the entrance to the political prisoners' section is not on his stool.

The hairs on Gabriel's arms rise in apprehension. Has the man abandoned his duties or gone to the bathroom? Gabriel hesitates. Perhaps he should return to the first floor?

Instead, ignoring his fear, he moves to the first cell. He shines his flashlight on the bed. He shines his flashlight in the corners and under the bed. The prisoner is gone.

The flashlight shakes in Gabriel's hand. He feels nauseous. Perhaps the secret police have taken the prisoner for questioning and not bothered to inform the guards. Perhaps the third floor guard accompanied the secret policemen.

But when he comes to the next cell, it too is empty. The next cell is also empty, and the next, and as each new cell is revealed to be empty, Gabriel walks faster and faster, until he jogs and then runs, sweeping the flashlight over each bunk as he passes it. No one. No one at all. They are all gone.

Panting, sweating, Gabriel comes to the last cell: Roberto D'Souza's cell. The cell is lit by the moon shining into the window: a huge burning white globe shrouded by the torn



ends of purpling storm clouds. Gabriel drops his flashlight to the floor. His mouth opens and closes. He does not even know what he is trying to say.

D'Souza floats next to the window that faces the sea, his eyes tightly shut and his arms outstretched like wings.

There is a raw churning in Gabriel's stomach. He wonders if, perhaps, he is still lying next to Sessina in their bed.

He pulls out his nightstick. He takes the cell key from his belt ring and unlocks the door.

D'Souza continues to float next to the window. The wind sends his long hair streaming out behind him.

"Come down!" Gabriel shouts. And, in a lower voice, "Come down."

D'Souza does not open his eyes. His body is still scarred and pitted with the excesses of his torturers, but the wounds are clean and unmarked by red or black. D'Souza floats toward the window until his head is pressed up against it.

D'Souza *melts* or wriggles through the window. It happens so slowly that Gabriel should be able to tell what has occurred, but he can't; it is as if he blinked and missed it. Gabriel runs to the window.

In the light of the moon, he sees D'Souza and dozens of other prisoners, washed clean by the bracing wind, the stinging rain. Their open eyes are filled with wonder and as they dip, gyrate and glide through the sky, Gabriel can hear distant laughter, faint and fading. As they fly further away, they appear as swathes and strips and rags of darkness swimming against the silvery white of the moon. He stares until he cannot see D'Souza, just the shapes of bodies moving like dolphins through water.

Watching their flight, Gabriel feels a weight in his heart, an emptiness, a loss, and a yearning. He shuts his eyes so tightly they hurt and wills that his spirit too should fly up into the moonlight, into the clouds, the torrential rain, and the wind. But as he wills this, as his body starts to become lighter than air, than life, he sees the images he has sought to block out: the scalps edged with blood, the secret police gathered around their victims, the rubber gloves and the wires.

When Gabriel opens his eyes, he is still on the ground, in the empty cell, with the door open.

Gabriel stands there for a long time before he takes off his guard's cap and lets it fall from his hands to the floor. He walks downstairs to the first floor, where the secret police no longer lounge, but instead run back and forth, run into each other, scream, shout, and gesticulate wildly. This secret is too big for their minds to hold. Boots clatter against cement runways. Automatic rifles are loaded with a desperate *chut-chut*.

Gabriel walks past them and out into the rain. The rain feels good against his face. It dribbles into the corners of

his mouth and he tastes its sweetness. Above, the prisoners and, ahead, from the parking lot, guards and secret police, soaking wet and strangely silent, shoot at the prisoners as if their sanity depends on it.

Ignoring them, Gabriel gets into his car and drives off, past the empty observation posts, past the twenty-four hour light, past the useless barbed wire, past the ludicrous outer fences, and onto the twenty mile stretch of road that leads home. He shivers and his shirt sticks to his skin, but he feels the cold only as a numbness that has no temperature. The night along the roadside no longer feels like an infinite bubble; it is static, dead.

Finally, he drives past his neighbours' ugly concrete houses and into the driveway of his own home. He gets out of the car and stands in the rain, but it no longer invigorates him. It makes him tired and old. He walks to the door, opens it, and shuts it behind him almost as an afterthought.

"Sessina?" he says, expecting no reply and hearing none.

He walks into the kitchen. Beside the stove he finds a message: 'Dinner is in the refrigerator'. He does not look in the refrigerator.

Instead, he unbuttons his shirt and takes it off, letting it fall to the floor and, as he makes his way into the bedroom, he frees himself from shoes, socks, pants, underwear, so that when he enters he is naked. He does not bother to towel himself dry before he gets under the covers with Sessina. Ignoring the photograph of his grandfather that stares accusingly in his direction, he snuggles up next to her and finds that he trembles against her skin, his heartbeat as rapid as if he had just run three miles. Clutching her to him, he is relieved to hear her pulse slow and even beneath the pressure of his hands, having feared in some irrational way that she might prove to be a phantom.

But she is here, and she is real.

Sessina stirs in her sleep and murmurs, "Gabriel."

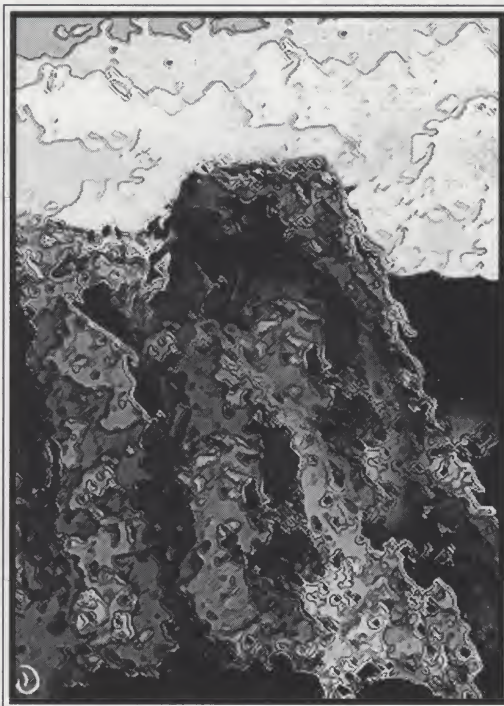
"Yes."

"How was the prison?"

Gabriel's mouth curls into a smile and a frown at the same time. "I... I saw a miracle. A miracle," he whispers, and now the tears come softly as he holds her. "He flew. He flew before my eyes...and I could not follow him."

But she is asleep again, lost in her own dreams, and does not seem to hear him. No matter. Soon he too is drifting off to sleep, so tired and confused that he cannot think of anything and yet is thinking of everything, all at once, for the first time.

**JEFF VANDERMEER** has novellas forthcoming in *Palace Corbie* and the Pumpkin Books anthology *The White of the Moon*. He is currently working on a novel and is also in the process of losing his mind reading horrible sf as a Philip K Dick Award judge for 1998.





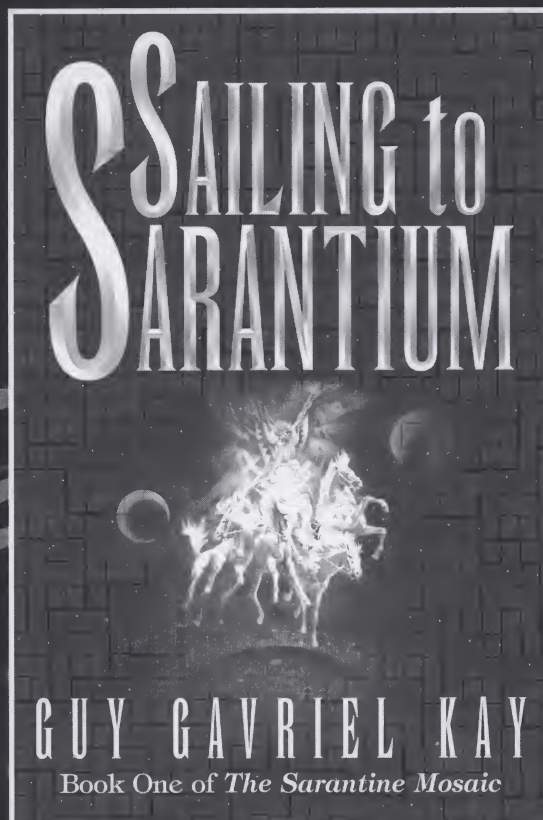
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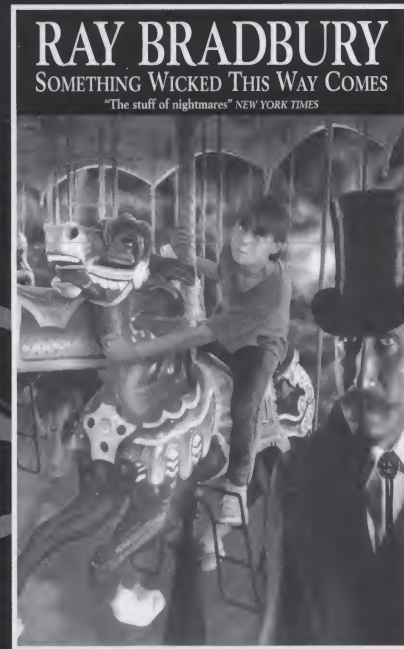


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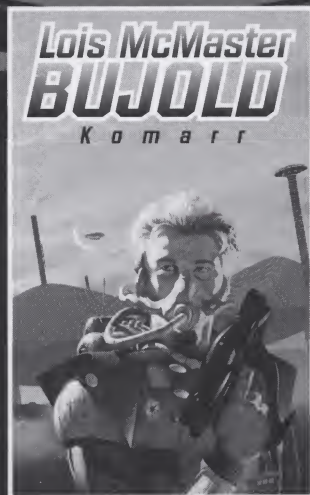


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